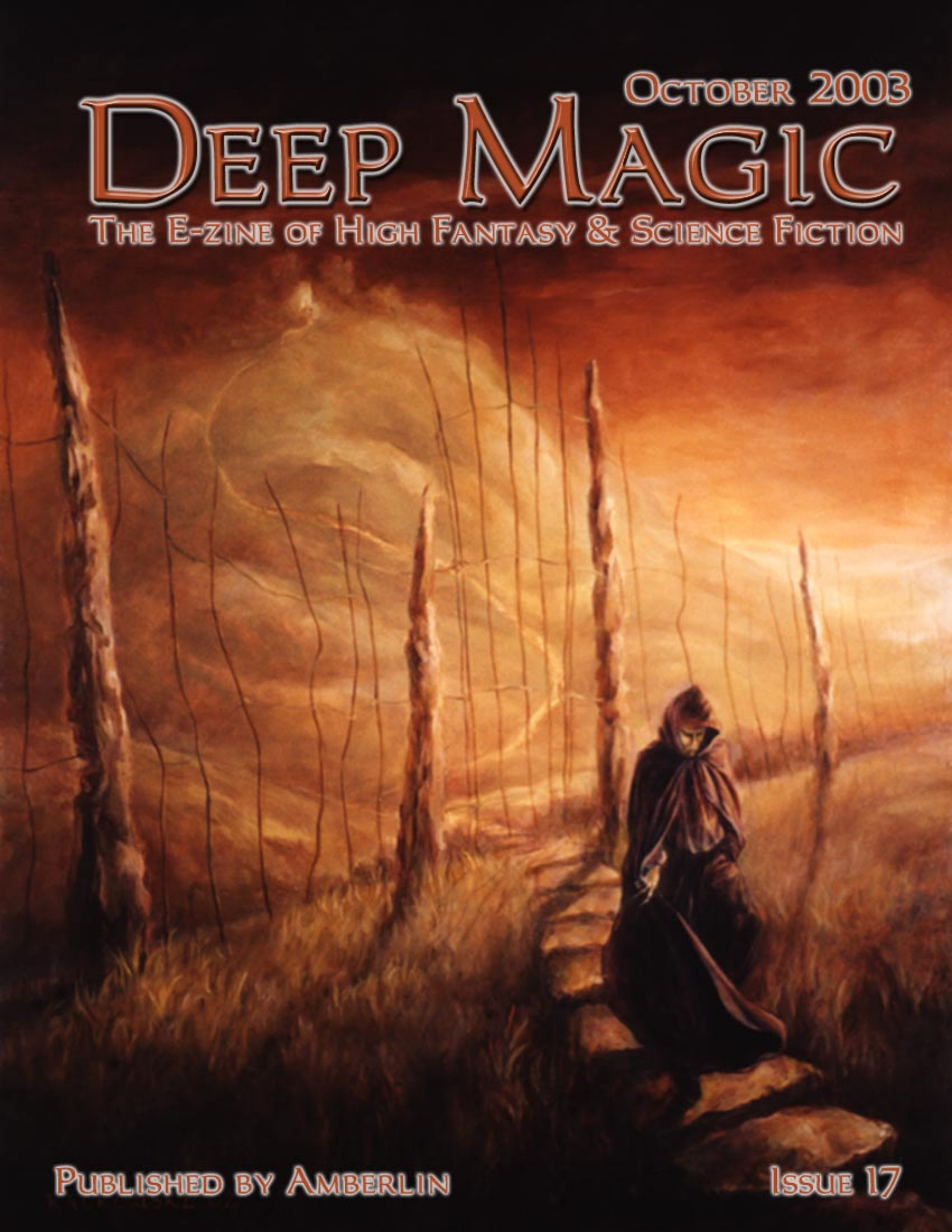
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October 2003

Welcome to another autumn addition of Deep Magic. It is a great time of year to curl up in front of a fire with a blanket and a good story...unless you live in Arizona, Texas, Death Valley, CA, etc. With Halloween approaching, many of you might be in the mood for a chilling tale or two. Our focus this month is on the scarier side of fantasy, which our amazing cover might have belied. Not only have we set the mood with some thrilling art by Rob Katkowski, but our stories have a little more edge than usual.

"A Winter Stew," by novelist, editor, and full-time teacher M. Thomas, will give you a savory taste of not only her ability to twist a yarn, but also a glimpse into the world where several of her novels are set. Brendon Taylor's "Plucking Spectres" will also send a shiver or two down your spines. "Into Pohjola" by Scott Clements, "Autumn Equinox" by Amy R. Butler and "Sanctuary" by Michael Jarrell round out our bevy of thrilling tales.

Even our poll this month asks about some of the most frightening creatures you've encountered in fantasy and science fiction. Cast your vote on our website and post a message if you think we have left out a particularly scary creature.

For those of you who have not already been swept up by the two novels we are currently serializing, take a look at "The Rise" (fantasy) and the third and final book of the "Procyx" trilogy (science fiction).

Another exciting addition to the issue is an interview and article by published author Sarah Ash. She offers insight into how she became a published author and her motivations and personality. Her talent shines through and will inspire those of you with literary aspirations.

Brendon Taylor's article, "Peas and Carrots: Another Helping of Legal Commentary," delves into the terms of publishing contracts. This article should prove useful to aspiring authors who are facing publishing contracts for the first time.

We are also very pleased with the feedback our "Geek's Guide to Grammar" and "Page Turners: Deep Magic Looks at Books" are getting. As always, your comments on our message boards or via email are welcome and appreciated. Many of our authors have enjoyed hearing from you. Keep up the good work by letting us know what you enjoy and do not enjoy about Deep Magic.

Until next month, thank you for downloading another issue of Deep Magic, and pass the word along to fellow fantasy and science fiction fans.

All the best,
The Editors

Safe Places for Minds to Wander

Writing Challenge

Each month, Deep Magic offers an opportunity and a challenge for our readers who are also writers. Whether you are a novice who has never written a fictional paragraph, or a veteran of the publishing business, you are welcome to participate. These challenges are designed to help you develop your writing talents. As incentive, or by way of warning, we select a small number of submissions each month for publication. Keep in mind that our writing challenge pieces are not edited and are usually written by amateur writers. We invite you to take us up on this month's challenge (below) by submitting your best effort by the **15th** to writingchallenge@deep-magic.net.

October 2003 Writing Challenge

In The Wheel of Time, by Robert Jordan, Rand Al'Thor transcends from being a simple sheep herder to a man who leads nations into war, and who, if Jordan ever finishes the series, will personally face the great lord of darkness. Along the way, he taps into an enormous magical power that enables him to draw lightning from the heavens, bind a person with air, and call balefire -- a molten liquid that not only obliterates as it strikes, but turns time upon itself (not unlike Superman flying around the world to save Lois Lane).

Supernatural, or magic, powers are common in fantasy and science fiction. In fact, they have been used so many times, authors find it difficult to put a fresh spin on these themes. That is what we challenge you to do this month...

Create a unique ability or power and give it to an individual. Then write a scene where the individual either discovers this power or uses it in front of others. It should be a unique or exceptional ability. Examples could include telepathy, flight, super strength, etc. However, the more unique, the better. Set your scene in a fantasy or science fiction setting. No word limit, but be reasonable.

Selections from the September 2003 Writing Challenge

The View From Narusalam

The above stories were selected from the submissions we received this last month. As a refresher, here is the writing challenge from last month:

Empathy means putting yourself in another's shoes, feeling, understanding, and relating to what they feel.

This is an essential ability for a writer to master. Without it, Editor Brendon Taylor might only be able to write about 30-something white male attorneys from Southeast Idaho. Undoubtedly, there are many fine tales to be told about just such a character, but at some point, even Brendon's mother may tire of reading them. Eventually.

The challenge this month is to write a short story, scene, or encounter through the perspective of some character as different from yourself as you can imagine. Choose a character of the opposite gender from yourself, with a different background, and different interests. Get into the character's head and portray their emotions, motivations, and thoughts. Make the character real. You must avoid shallow thoughts, clichés and stereotypes to truly succeed at this challenge. Give us your best effort at becoming someone new in 1000 words or less, due by September 15, 2003. We can't wait to meet the new you.

The View From Narusalam

By A. M. Stickel

My life as a man is over. Suspended in stasis, I view my new limits, chew on my remorse, and am amazed at all that I perceive. Autoscanners easily detect what they must of the solar system and the scene of my former haunts, Earth, planet of my origin. Though alive in transmuted form, the old Emil Shemla is as good as dead, if death could be said to have anything good about it.

Farewell, Aliyah, though you will never hear me say it. Farewell to the son or daughter I'll never know. I hope my crime in begetting you was worth it. But then, any child of Aliyah's would be worth it.

I remember the Tribunal's pronouncement, rendered not by my fellow man, though man numbers in the billions, but by the artificial voice of man's invention, the Governing Computer: "For the crime of unauthorized cross-cultural union, the scientist-citizen, Emil Shemla, is sentenced to Pluto's Remote Observatory for life. Let this be a lesson for humanity, that none of them, no matter their status, is exempt from the Law. All cultures must retain separate but equal status to keep mankind from destroying itself. There can be no exceptions. That justice may be served, the same Law which forbids taking life, be it that of the newly conceived innocent or that of the misconceived criminal, will redress mankind's grievances by appropriate redirection."

How ironic that I invented the means of transporting myself into exile, the Shemla Drive. Now unmanned scanners record my last moments of lucidity and drain my creative juices to the very end, for the benefit of the billions. Should this not satisfy their justice, my clone may do so in future, until my offense has been cleansed. My mind being too valuable for them to waste, I will waste away until I'm nothing but mind.

Having always taken pride in my physical appearance, and most at home in the midst of a throng admiring my sharp wit, I'm enslaved by my own inventions. The last music I will ever hear is whining servos supporting me. I will turn my gaze to the stars beyond Pluto. Instead of looking through a telescope, I am become one.

I can only dream of Aliyah standing on the roof of her Arkology, though I long to hold her again. I dream she looks up to Narusalam, the place in the sky where I sit sentinel at the edge of the solar system. I dream she asks me, "Emil, what are you thinking now that you've turned your back on humanity for love of me?" I dream I can touch the place where our child is transmuting her body because of me, and hear her ask, "Child, is your life worth my loss of your father? He was so sure the Law would bend for him, that the Tribunal would pronounce some lesser sentence. Will you inherit his deadly legacy?"

Somehow I know Aliyah will often press the button on her Wrist Com to view the forbidden ceremony that joined us. The Spy-corders missed nothing. Yet the Law did not forbid dissemination of the evidence. A six-inch high hologram of us in identical brown jumpsuits will spring to life. She will enlarge and step into it toward an image of me standing before her in the glory of young manhood, tall, lean, red-haired, and green-eyed. My Aliyah of small frame, slim waist, long dark hair and radiant brown eyes will enter my embrace. We will kiss, promising undying love. It will run in a continuous loop until her tears blind her to it and she turns it off. But, when she feels the child move, she will smile again.

Into Pohjola

By Scott Clements

Under leaden clouds, the two longships alighted like ghosts on the icy shore of Pohjola.

Behind them, beyond the line of treacherous rock that guarded the bay like teeth, the wide Sea was a sheet of undulating jet. It had been the meticulous work of hours, guided by the skills and instincts of the finest seamen in the world, to reach that wicked place at the end of the world. In the starless darkness, ice and rock and wind had been as lethal as swords and arrows, as deadly as words.

From his place at the prow of the lead vessel, Vainamoinen smiled wryly at the thought. Perhaps not so deadly as that last.

"So?" Illmarinen asked from behind.

"So," Vainamoinen answered.

Beneath their feet the mighty wooden vessel swayed with the movement of the icy waves. Vainamoinen hitched his cloak against the bitter cold and stared beyond the snarling, dragon-headed prow. The sandy shore was dotted with large boulders and half-dead trees. To the east, a large tree stood near the water's edge, its branches reaching, stretching hungrily outward over the rolling blackness of the inlet.

The princess hung from its dead branches, swaying grey and limp in the night wind. Her eyes were plucked clean, and the remains of her feet hung just above the surface of the ravenous water.

Vainamoinen squeezed his eyes shut, thrust the memory aside. When he opened them, the dead woman was gone.

The wizard sighed. Beyond the sloping shore, the black iron walls of Pohjola stood strong and immutable, shadows darker than night.

And beyond them, like a gnarled finger that sought to gouge and scar the cloudless sky, Kuura stood. The ancient citadel of Louhi gazed down on them with contempt. Vainamoinen shook his head.

So much evil.

Behind him, no one in the vessel, in either of the vessels, spoke. Only the harsh breathing of the oarsmen and the creak of the clinker-built hull broke the frigid silence.

Behind him, no one in the vessel, in either of the vessels, spoke. Only the harsh breathing of the oarsmen and the creak of the clinker-built hull broke the frigid silence.

"So," Vainamoinen said again. Then he reached back, and from the leather case strapped to his side, drew forth his kantele. He plucked gently at the strings of the ancient harp, then the Wizard of Light raised his voice and began to sing:

"Come, thou gentle sleep,
Step across this waking threshold,
Claim these sons of Northland,
Claim these sons of dire winter,

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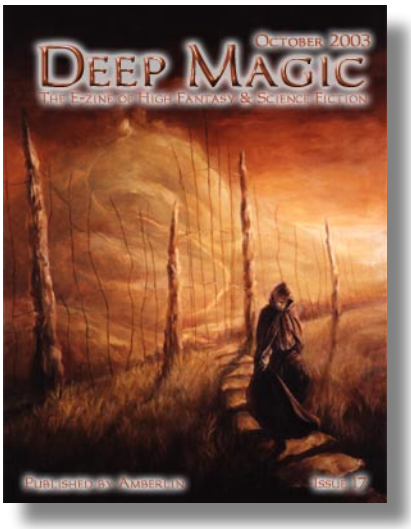
Featured Artist
Rob Katkowski



Name: Rob Katkowski
Age: 28
Residence: Greensburg, PA
Marital Status: Single
Children: None
Hobbies: Other than fantasy artwork…Golf, Hiking, Skateboarding, Magic (the evil card game)
Personal Quote: "Something's missing"
Favorite Book or Author: The Vampire Lestat & Anne Rice
Started Painting In: Started painting at 12 yrs old…Began painting fantasy about 2 years ago
Artist Most Inspired By: A Nordic painter named Odd Nerdrum… he does large scale figurative paintings that are very dark and subdued; also Brom, Keith Parkinson, Justin Sweet (his oils, not the digital stuff).

Mediums You Work In: Oils are the only paint for me. I paint slowly and change things often when I paint…oils are good for that. Also, the colors become deep and intense when glazing, producing a stained glass window look. I use various mediums when I draw, but pencil is what I use the most. I usually do a full scale drawing in pencil before I begin the actual painting. It's much easier to work out values and detail in black and white than in color.
Educational/Training Background: I have a BFA from Ohio State University with a drawing/painting major. The rest of my training consists of self-teaching by reading lots of books and trial and error. You learn so much by actually painting.
Where Your Work Has Been Published or Displayed: I did a Paladin's Handbook cover painting for a company called Chainmail Bikini Games…a drawing for Paradox magazine Issue#1…some drawings and a cover painting for Dagoom, Inc…other work has been commissioned by individuals.
Where Someone Can Buy Your Art or Contact You Professionally: You can call me

(724-836-0927) or browse my site; there's some stuff for sale there.
Website URL: www.robkatkowski.com

Q; How did you come to be an artist?
A: I guess it started at 7 or 8 yrs old, drawing G.I. Joe comics in colored pencils. While my friends were swimming or playing, I would just sit up in my room and draw. It wasn't a real conscious decision…guess I'm somewhat of a loner and art just fits my personality. So here I am.

Q: How would you describe your work?
A: I describe them as smoky landscapes filled with dark creatures and figures. The power of suggestion, to me, is more powerful than excessive detail.

Q: Where do you find your inspiration?
A: In books (anything fantasy)…the descriptive landscapes of The Lord of the Rings trilogy give me many ideas. Being among nature inspires me

Q: What inspired this piece? (Tell us its story.)
A: I was driving along and saw this graveyard atop this mound-like hill, like a little mountain with graves up and down every side. I had to stop and take pictures. At the time I was reading an Anne Rice novel and had been thinking about vampires a lot. As soon as I saw this cemetery, the idea for the painting came to life. Just thinking of how a vampire would have to live…the same thing night after night for centuries with no say in the matter. Think of being stuck in a 9 to 5 job you hated, and never being able to quit or retire, ever. And how routine this act of taking life would become almost second nature.

Q: What do you consider your influences?
A: The hope of someday waking up and knowing that my job is to create fantasy artwork. By supporting me 100% in my art, my parents helped me realize it could happen.

Q: What has been your greatest success in your artistic career?
A: Creating all the artwork, along with designing a website to display it, all within a couple years time.

Q: What trends are you seeing in the Sci-Fi/Fantasy genre?
A: It seems like the market is bigger than ever, due in a large part to the Lord of the Rings movies and online rolepalying games such as Everquest. On the artistic side of things, I see a lot of artwork switching from traditional mediums to computer generated works, which I'm not a big fan of, personally.

A Winter Stew

By M. Thomas

The snow came in late autumn, staying until well past the winter months. By then the cottage was blocked up, door to roof. The animals were brought in and settled into various crooks and cupboards. The cow had a shed attached to the back bedroom, finished just in time for the snows and filled with hay. Neffie sat by the fire, heavy with her first child, while a small, ginger cat lapped at the fingers on her right hand. The cat was called a suckler. Whether weaned too early, or just reluctant, it continued on even in its dotage to suck at things—knuckles, bare toes, the teat-shaped corner of a blanket.

When there was a knocking at the door she and Evam initially ignored it, simply because there could *be* no knocking at the door; not with the windows full of white and the only warm place in the house a spot before the fire with the animals gathered around at night, though they smelled and sometimes the cat worried the chickens. There could be no knocking at the door, because there was no door. In the endless solidity of snow, it had become nothing more than the place where the snow stopped.

Yet there it was. A *rat-tat, tat-tat-rat.*

"Evam?" She looked up at her husband, her pale hair catching the light of the fire in small rivers of red.

He shrugged. "Couldn't say, Neffie. Someone's got through."

"Shall I get a knife?" She began to struggle to her feet, ponderous and awkward.

"Settle yourself my love. I can take care of things."

"You're a dear man."

"You're a dear wife."

They giggled together at this remnant of adolescent adoration. Evam went to open the door.

Veron Harriday grinned. He was missing several teeth, and his eyes were slightly sunken. But there was a spark in them, the slight gleam of a hungry man.

"Saw your roof," said the man standing there. He was dressed in furs so thick, and thatch of beard so wild, he had become like some small bear. "I tunneled down a bit to see to you."

"Oh," said Neffie. "That's kind, it is. Come in by the fire."

"I don't recognize you from the town," Evam said.

"Evam. Where's your manners? The man's come to see to us."

The stranger shrugged off a pack and his enormous coat, then unwrapped his thick wool scarf. He hung them up on the hook by the door.

"Veron Harriday," he said, turning. "And I en't from the village so much as passing through. Pass through every winter and summer. I trap the forest area up the road. Good stoat here, wild mink."

Outside, it was late afternoon. The bare winter sun shining on the snow trickled down through the drifts piled up against the windows. In this light the cottage was gray and watery, with only the slight warmth of fiery orange around the hearth.

"And how's the hunting this year?" Evam said.

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Drakhaouls, Dragons and Dracula

By Sarah Ash

"Every time you let the Drakhaoul within you take possession, you will become less human. Poisons are released into your blood: poisons that will change you, both in body and soul."

When Gavril Nagarian reads these words, written by Volkh, the father he never knew, he begins to understand the full horror of his blood inheritance. He is now host to the Drakhaoul, a powerful dragon-daemon, that has gifted him and his forbears with extraordinary powers – but at a terrible price:

"The only way to retain our human appearance is to...ingest fresh human blood. Innocent blood."

The name 'Drakhaoul' in 'Lord of Snow and Shadows', evolved as a blend of the Greek word for dragon 'drakon', with echoes of ghoul, a spirit from Middle Eastern mythology that preys on corpses. I was aware that readers might suspect a link between 'Drakhaoul' and Vlad Tepes, the sadistic Romanian warlord known as Dracula(apparently 'dracul' in Romanian can mean both devil and/or dragon), whom Bram Stoker took as his inspiration for Count Dracula. However, the leaders of the House of Nagarian, Gavril's forebears, are not undead and, although driven to seek out innocent blood, they do not haunt the night, or avoid daylight, holy water and garlic.

Vampire folklore is, of course, common in most countries in Eastern Europe, not just in Romania. But as to the dragon aspect of Gavril's inheritance, when the Nagarians become 'truly Drakhaon', they metamorphose into night-winged creatures that can breathe a devastating and lethal blue fire to destroy their enemies. They are neither the benevolent dragons of Chinese mythology, nor crafty treasure-hoarders, like Smaug, of Norse legends. I'd been fascinated since childhood by the hero legends of Old Russia, the byliny, that relate the exploits of Prince Vladimir of Kiev, the 'Little Red Sun' and his bogatyri, the Knights of the Golden Table. This led me to an intriguing study by Munin Nederlander on the Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh in which he analyses the symbolism and allegorical significance of the legends. So when the hero Alyosha, son of a priest, confronts the dragon-magician Tougarin, the allegory of a Christian knight confronting the power of the earlier heathen gods worshipped by the Slavs is not hard to discern.

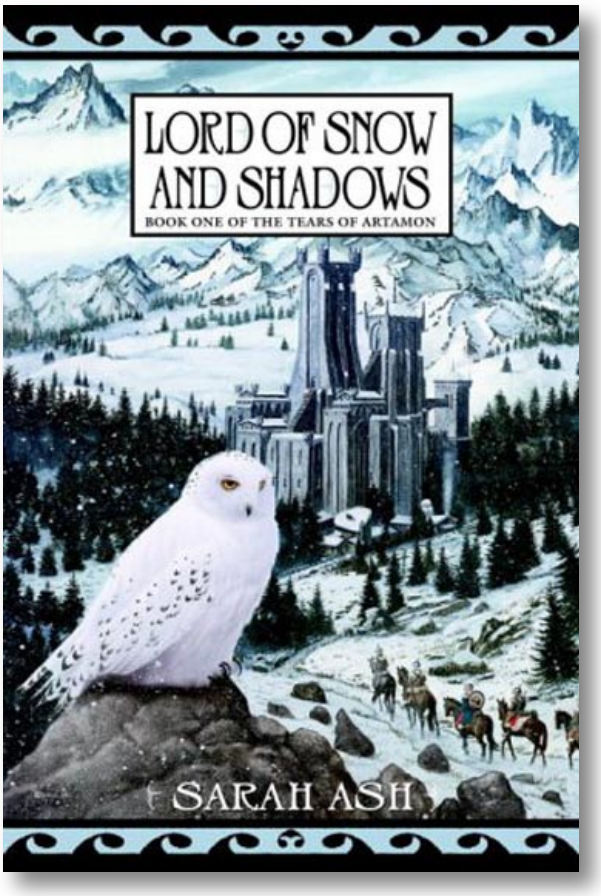
Another influence in the creation of the Drakhaoul legend of Azhkendir was the story of Gilles de Rais, later brought to life as 'Bluebeard' by Charles Perrault. Though it was as much the dark and broodingly evocative music of Bartok in 'Duke Bluebeard's Castle' that put the suggestion into my mind, as Perrault. Kastel Drakhaon, the lonely, haunted castle Gavril inherits, with its locked rooms and secret passages and whispered stories of the Drakhaon's Brides, young and innocent girls who were brought to the kastel to satiate the Drakhaon's hunger.

What intrigued me about Gavril's dilemma was the fact that his outward appearance would gradually change. How much self-control would he be able to exert before the urges became too great to deny? Louis and Lestat; Angel and Spike; the vampires of today's popular culture are all beautiful, only revealing the beast within when they fight, feed and kill. Whereas Gavril is driven to seek out innocent blood to repress his inner daemon and stop it re-fashioning

continued on next page

him in its own image. The more he uses his powers – even to defend the people he loves - the more he becomes a monster; the Drakhaoul is slowly re-fashioning him in its own image. At the heart of the story is Gavril's refusal to accept his destiny and his search for a way to alter what seems to be an immutable fate.

Sarah Ash 10.09.2003



Sarah Ash
Interview

Age: 53
Residence: Beckenham, Kent U.K.
Marital Status: Married
Children: Two sons
Hobbies: Music: all kinds, from traditional jazz, through world music to all kinds of classical stuff
Favorite Book or Author: Mary Renault still remains my favourite author over the years (though Ursula Le Guin comes a very close second). My favourite of the moment is Jasper Fforde.
First time you tried to get something published:
In 1964 – a children's fantasy novel called 'Charlie's Treasure'. It was rejected—though in a very encouraging way—by Heinemann and Faber & Faber. I was fourteen.
Authors Most Inspired By: Alexandre Dumas (lately and justly elevated to the Panthéon!); William Shakespeare; J.R.R. Tolkien; John Fowles; Ursula Le Guin; Mary Renault
Educational/Training Background:
New Hall, Cambridge University
Degrees: MA (Hons) Mus.B (Hons) Cantab. PGCE
I started teaching in 1973 – still teaching now (part-time).
Published works (fiction/non-fiction/obituaries):
Moths to a Flame (1995 - Orion)
Songspinners (1996 - Orion)
The Lost Child (1998 - Orion)
Songspinners (German translation) (2001 - Heyne)
Short stories published in Interzone, infinity plus, 'Dancing with the Dark' and 'Best New Horror' etc.
Website URL: www.sarah-ash.com

Q: Tell us the story of how your first book was published:
A: I'd been trying to get published for some years and getting positive feedback - but never that oh-so-elusive contract. The chunky manuscripts kept coming back, dropping onto the doormat with a depressing thud. So my husband Michael suggested I should try writing a short story. A short story, the most difficult form to get, right? I was convinced I would make a mess of it – but what did I have to lose in trying? To my surprise, my first story was accepted and published – and my second story 'Mothmusic' was published by David Pringle in INTERZONE in 1992. One day soon after the phone rang and it was Deborah Beale, Editorial Director of the new Millennium imprint at Orion! I floated around on a cloud for at least a week after that call – which eventually led to the acceptance and publication of 'Moths to a Flame'.

Q: How has the internet affected your relationship with readers and/or publishers?
A: The internet has put me in touch with many more readers than I could have reached in earlier days. I've just launched my own website (my webmaster is the multi-talented Ariel, editor of The

continued on next page

Alien Online). So I'm very grateful for the extra contacts it's brought me, both as a writer and a reader.

From a publishing point of view, it's wonderful to be able to communicate so easily across the water with my U.S. editor, Anne Groell, and to be able to send a whole typescript, when requested, in electronic form.

Q: Your worlds and kingdoms are very rich in the arts (music, poetry, artwork, etc.) and have a very Early Modern era feel (firearms, science/magic, etc). What has been your inspiration for the settings?
A: I love reading about past times, places and people. I've done some research into the world of Louis XIV (in whose reign Cyrano de Bergerac wrote some of the first science fiction and Perrault devised his versions of fairy stories). It's a fascinating period, full of contradictions and creativity and immense social change. However, it was not Louis' France but Peter the Great's Russia that inspired the setting for 'The Tears of Artamon' – though I should state here that neither Eugene nor Gavril is based on a historical character or actual historical events.

Q: Do you have any favorite characters from the novel?
A: Oh, Gavril – and Eugene, of course. No, I love them all, really, even the wicked ones! I had a lot of fun writing the unscrupulous Lieutenant Oskar Alvborg and Altan Kazimir, the scientist with a vodka habit; they don't acquit themselves at all well under pressure and I can relate to that! I have a particularly soft spot for Kiukiu. And I enjoyed writing Elysia Andar; it was good to have an older woman's perspective from time to time and to explore her feelings.

Q: What influences have helped you become the writer you are?
A: Where to start? My parents and grandmother, for reading wonderful stories and poems to me. And listening to music; I started 'seeing' images when I heard music as a child. Then there's Shakespeare; my English and Drama teachers at school instilled in me a love for the language and the rhythm of the words. Of late, I've been fortunate enough to have good editors and a wise agent.

Q: How much of your time do you devote to writing?
A: As long as life doesn't get in the way, I write every weekday morning, go to the school where I work, and then write again when I get home. A good fifty percent of the working week – as long as people from Porlock don't interrupt.

Q: When you have a time where you don't think you can write another word, what is it that gets you going again?
A: Listening to an unfamiliar, exciting piece of music can help. A brisk walk also does wonders. Or watching anime. I adore anime! I've just discovered 'R.O.D' 'Read or Die!' A librarian with super powers – great stuff.

Q: What is up your sleeve for future stories?
A: If I'm allowed, I'd love to write more in the world of New Rossiya. But there's a Welsh/Celtic fantasy waiting in the wings as well, and something weird set in my home city of Bath, so maybe I'll get the opportunity to explore those ideas next.

Autumn Equinox

By Amy R. Butler

The castle was haunted, and we never would have ventured near it, even if our parents had allowed it. I had heard stories of children wandering over to it, sneaking inside for a dare, and never ever returning. The darkness of the night and the way the candle flickered on my mother's face as she whispered these stories was enough to dissuade me from even thinking about exploring the crumbling building that housed evil spirits. People swore that the ghosts of the castle had garden parties every solstice and equinox, and no one dared leave their cottages the night before All Saint's Day, for the ghosts were allowed to leave their stately prison and roam the streets. Every night their raucous laughter echoed for miles. I feared that place.

My sister was drunk the night she disappeared. She was in my room, raving like a lunatic, babbling incessantly to me in sentence fragments and made-up words. She was talking about the haunted castle, how she was going to live there as a princess.

The castle was haunted, and we never would have ventured near it, even if our parents had allowed it.

Suddenly she grew very still, and she seemed to calm. "It's beautiful in the moonlight," she said softly. "People don't know because they never go near there at night, but it's absolutely beautiful in the moonlight."

Then she burst into a wild peal of laughter and flew from the room.

I never saw her again.

She wasn't in her bed that morning when my mother went to rouse her. We searched everywhere frantically, avoiding the one place we dreaded she had gone. We crept home to wait, hoping desperately that she would return. But when she didn't come back and didn't come back, I burst into tears and confessed to my parents her lunacy of the night before. My mother cried out loud, and my father choked back a sob. They were both pale. They gave her up for dead.

We buried an empty coffin and set a monument in place. It bears a warning, a plea that no one wander to the castle at night, not even to see the moonlight gleaming on the towers, lest their families have to bury an empty box in memory of them.

* * *

My parents and I spent years mourning my sister's passing. Every night before All Saint's Day I was tempted to stay at the window, waiting for her to pass by, but I always backed away as dusk fell.

Three years after my sister's disappearance, the village suffered another loss to the castle. A little boy, merely two years old, had wandered from his mother's side as she chatted with another lady at the market. By the time she discovered he was missing and went frantically searching for him, it was too late. She rounded the corner just in time to see her little boy disappear into the shadow of the castle. The mother was too frozen with fear to follow her son. She never saw him again.

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Sanctuary
By Michael Jarrell

I

The Journal of Alain de Navarre,
Curate of Monastère de Maudire.

Sixth day of November, the year of our Lord One Thousand Four Hundred Ninety Six.

I have chosen to give account here that others may be warded away from this place. The Abbey of Maudire is home to me. I have been here since my twelfth year, serving faithfully the Bishop of Trusainte and the Abbot of Maudire. I have cared for those of this parish, healing the sick and encouraging the spirit of my flock for more than two-score years. This is my life and all I have ever known. And now I fear it is for naught.

Night has come. It is not only in the time of this day but the essence of being, of our very existence. One can look on the courtyard and see plainly the wickedness that has befallen us. Our brethren, once numbering more than one hundred, are only now eight. Many are the fresh graves on the holy lands of Monastère de Maudire; many more are not yet plowed and their occupants cry out for proper vestments performed before the Lord. The reek of their corpses, the pungent odor of death, hangs about the halls of Maudire. At night I see their faces, contorted in grimaces of pain and terror as they left this world. It shudders my soul to think on them. For once they were brothers, closer than my birth family. Here, we lived. Here, we learned. Here, we served the Lord. Here we will all die before our time has come. I would that I could offer prayers for their souls, lay them to rest as God intended. Yet, there is no time.

Wickedness batters us from within as the enemy uses our own minds and hearts as his weapons.

Even now Abbot Donatien prays before the altar for our protection, his voice rising and falling between the lamentations and supplications that he utters. These many years the Lord has looked favorably on us. We have prospered taking care of the parish, performing the rites and duties of our office before Him and for His glory. Now, the abbot cries out with earnest supplications that Almighty God will be merciful, that he will send Michael and his angels to be our defense. All of us, even now as we go about what may be our final tasks in this life, echo his entreaties, presenting our souls before God to do with as is His pleasure.

Of the others, Germain the deacon barricades the narthex with items set apart for worship, not war. Brother Tujan and Brother Briand secure the windows along the nave and transepts as best as they can. And the novices – Neville, Marlon, and Vere – all work to erect a bulwark in the crossing. I look on them fondly, these who have remained, more appropriately survived, until the end. They may say to St. Paul that they have fought the good fight, they have finished the course, they have kept the faith. Within these hallowed chambers we will make our stand against the enemy, this evil unleashed by Friar Thibaud of Ornaun.

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Page Turners
Deep Magic Looks at Books

One request we frequently get here in the offices of Deep Magic is for recommendations on what else to read. I mean, let's face it, even when we provide you, our faithful readers, with an issue of nearly 200 pages of quality high fantasy and science fiction, that's still not enough. We would have to produce a weekly e-zine in order to meet many of our readers' needs for quality fiction.

To help meet that need, Deep Magic is proud to present a monthly book review column in which we'll tantalize you with discussions of quality (and sometimes not-so-quality) books.

To help you make informed decisions on what to read, we've included with our reviews two handy features. First, each review will rate the book or series on a scale of one to five. In keeping with our Lamp Post Awards, we've chosen the lamp post as our rating icon. Five lamp posts means a book that every library should have. One lamp post means a book whose sole merit is it makes a good shimmy to keep your desk level. Second, in keeping with our motto of 'safe places for minds to wander,' at the end of each review, we are including a brief synopsis of areas that some might find objectionable. These two features inter-relate only insofar as too much objectionable material quite often reflects a book that is more concerned with sensationalism than with telling a good story.

So, enough of this, let's dive into the books!

Editors Choice: Classic Fantasy

The Silmarillion
By J.R.R. Tolkien

The Lord of the Rings is such a staple of the fantasy genre, a cornerstone that undergirds all high and epic fantasy, that a review of it is pointless: it *defines* classic and to review it would be to question the foundations of the genre. However, Tolkien's true magnum opus, the work he spent most of his life on and left uncompleted at the time of his death, *The Silmarillion*, definitely merits a review, if for no other reason than to point curious readers in the right direction.

The Silmarillion was first published in 1977, a few years after Tolkien's death. At the time of his father's death, Christopher Tolkien gathered up the papers that Tolkien had been working on, gave them a strong edit, including collating and resolving internal conflicts, and published *The Silmarillion*. The book takes its name from one of the five epic tales contained within: in this case, it is the story of the creation of three great jewels that contain the light of the world. The other four stories tell of episodes in the past of Middle-earth, leading up to the events in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

If you've ever wondered about the many references within *The Lord of the Rings* to the past of Middle-earth, then *The Silmarillion* is a must-read. The book begins with the 'Ainulindale,' which recounts how Iluvatar, the One, created Middle-earth, and how Melkor fell from grace. Next is the 'Valaquenta' which tells of the Valar and the Maiar, the latter of which included Gandalf. After the 'Quenta Silmarillion' (which is most of the book) comes the 'Akallabeth' which tells the story of the fall of the island of Numenor, which sunk beneath the sea, much like Atlantis. The Numenoreans came east to Middle-earth and became the 'Men of the West' of which Aragorn is a descendent. Finally, there is 'Of the Rings of Power and the Third Age,' which tells of the events leading up to *The Lord of the Rings*.

The book is epic in scope, but also in tone. Tolkien wrote these stories as the myths of his secondary world, and he wrote them in the tone that myths often come in. The language can be daunting at times and, to be honest, quite dull if you're looking for an adventurous story like in his previous works. At times, Tolkien succeeds

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too well and it becomes material more for a Penguin's Classic than for a fantasy novel. However, if you're a strong Tolkien fan (which I consider myself to be), I strongly recommend the book. One way I've found to be enjoyable in working through the text is to listen to the wonderful audio version, as read by Martin Shaw. It is an unabridged reading, but it brings the text alive, showing that Tolkien had a true ear for the oral tradition.

Possible objectionable material: a few scenes of strong violence, but nothing one would consider 'graphic.'

(Reviewed by Matthew Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy
Illumination
By Terry McGarry

In the land of Eiden Myr, the continent shaped like a man, it takes three to create magic. Each triad of mages is made up of a binder, wordsmith, and illuminator. They work in concert to create ephemeral manuscripts, or 'castings,' that are used to heal. Young Liath has spent the requisite dozen years training to become an illuminator, only to have her magelight fail at her first real casting as a full-fledged mage. This, however, is unheard of: once a mage, always a mage in Eiden Myr. One can lose one's power as easily as one can stop the sun from rising.

To find an answer for what has happened to her, Liath journeys to the Ennead, the nine senior mages of the land, to seek healing at their hands. They attempt to restore her magelight, to no avail. Instead, they tell her that to revive her magelight and regain her powers, she must seek out a former apprentice of theirs, a wordsmith, who has begun using his powers for evil and personal gain. The only clue they give her as to his whereabouts is a sample of his handwriting. Liath accepts the mission and begins wandering the land to find Torrin Wordsmith and (hopefully) restore her powers.

As she travels through the continent, Liath slowly learns that the world is not as simple as she once thought. She is not the first person the Ennead has sent out, nor are her assumptions about the superiority of mages always correct. Her quest thus becomes as much a journey of self-discovery as it is a mission to find the darkmage.

As far as first novels go, Ms. McGarry has started out well with a fairly strong book. However, the story loses itself in the early middle when the reader is subjected to page after page after page of Liath entering first this village and then that village only to discover that the darkmage is not there. The monotony is broken occasionally by other characters traveling with Liath, but their importance to the story is not revealed until later, making it very difficult to get through the book. Once the story picks up, however, it doesn't let go.

The concept of a continent shaped like a man is intriguing, and the placenames are all anatomically based: the Head, the Neck, the Weak Leg, the Fist, etc., but the rest of the world of Eiden Myr is not as fully realized as it should be. Ms. McGarry focuses more on characterization than on world-building, which leads to a weakening of the plot, since the reader cannot relate as fully to the setting. Still, for its faults *Illumination* is an enjoyable read.

Possibly objectionable material: brief sexual encounters, including one that involves murder.

(Reviewed by Matthew Winslow)

Book Review: Fantasy
The Baker's Boy
By J.V. Jones

In the Known Lands, there has always been tension between the Four Kingdoms and Bren, but it has reached an all-time low when King Lesketh, King of the Four Kingdoms, is injured by a Brennan arrow while

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hunting. He never fully recovers from the wounds and it is whispered that the arrow was poisoned.

A dozen or so years later, the king still hasn't recovered. His queen is now de facto regent and there are power plays going on within the court. On the one hand is Lord Baralis who is a johnny-come-lately to the court, promoted to his position due to service to the king, although many say it was magic. On the other hand is Lord Maybor, an old landed lord, who manages to betroth his daughter, Melliandra, to the wicked Prince Kylock.

Melliandra does not take well to the idea of being married to Kylock, so she flees and comes across Jack, the baker's boy, who is on the run, mostly from himself and his magical powers that are beginning to surface, but also from Lord Baralis who is afraid of what Jack's powers represent.

Thus begins J.V. Jones's 'The Book of Words' trilogy. If it sounds like standard fantasy fare, you'd be right: it is standard fare, but it is much less than what is considered standard in the quality of its writing. The plot is riddled with cliches and the characters are stock and stiff. Empathy for any of the characters is almost non-existent. Also, the world of the Known Lands is thin and not well realized. It depends more on cliché and trope than on skilled writing. Furthermore, the story is chock full of perversion, both in sex and in violence. There are much better ways to escape with a fantasy book than this.

Possible objectionable material: The book opens with a grotesque murder, and it only gets worse: voyeurism, drug-induced rape, mutilation, religious torture, and gratuitous sex.

(Reviewed by Matthew Winslow)

Book Review: Science Fiction
Hell's Faire
By John Ringo

Hell's Faire is the fourth and final installment in John Ringo's series The Legacy of the Aldenata. It covers a two-day battle between humans and Posleen. While this book is mostly battle, the prologue and epilogue make it clear there is much more going on in this series.

Posleen, yellow, long-necked aliens with a taste for human flesh, invaded Earth five years earlier and have subdued most of the people. They refer to food as "thresh" and their word for humans is "threshkeen," which means "food that stung." Prior to reaching Earth, they had conquered many planets and other kinds of aliens, but so far, humans have put up the greatest resistance to their incursions.

On Earth, only a few remote areas and a section of North America remain under human control. The Posleen are trying to cross the Appalachian Mountains and come up through the Cumberland and Ohio basins to conquer the last large pocket of resistance. They must be stopped.

Major Mike O'Neal leads the human defenses. Mike is legendary for leading the unit that drove the Posleen off the planet Diess. Tulo'stenaloor, also a veteran of the battle for Diess, leads the Posleen forces as the two forces head toward a climactic conflict.

This book is centered on military strategy and combat, and will definitely appeal to readers who enjoy those themes. Characters use all kinds of advanced technology weapons, including a tank larger than a football field. Ringo does a great job describing weapons and strategy for non-military types like myself.

There is a lot of action, but not much character development. There is little information about what has happened in previous books, which may leave readers, such as myself, with unanswered questions. I presume that character and story development has taken place in previous books and Ringo felt it unnecessary to repeat everything for this story.

There were a few things Ringo failed to fully explain in this book. For example, the Posleen are described as being long-necked, yellow creatures; the leaders having crests on their heads. The cover art depicts them as greenish lizard-like monsters. Then, from time to time in the story, they are referred to as centaurs. (I'm still confused about that.) Hopefully this and other questions are put to rest if the series is read from the beginning. The first book is called *A Hymn Before Battle*.

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Included in this book was a free CD-ROM from Baen Publishing. It has lots of cool stuff on it, but my favorite item was a full audio version of *Hell's Faire*.

Possible objectionable material: Very strong language, violence, and some non-graphic sexual content.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

Book Review: Science Fiction
Wasteland of Flint
By Thomas Harlan

Wasteland of Flint is the first book in a new series by Thomas Harlan. This epic is set in an alternate future where the Aztec (Méxica) civilization dominates the Earth and an interstellar empire. According to Méxica historical tradition, there have been cycles of life followed by destruction. Each cycle is called a Sun. This story takes place during the Sixth Sun.

The Méxica are anxious to discover what they can about those who lived during the First Sun, at least a million years previous. Artifacts from this era are collected and studied vigorously.

Preliminary surveys indicate that the planet Ephesus Three was shaped by First Sun beings and then abandoned. The Company receives approval to send a ship, the *Palenque,* and a survey crew to search for First Sun artifacts.

When the *Palenque* survey team appears to be missing, Gretchen Anderssen, a xeno-archeologist is diverted from a planned dig on Kolob Four and sent with a team to investigate. Her every move is closely scrutinized by an Imperial Judge. This is no mere rescue operation.

Reading this book is no mean feat either. The author has included a number of words and phrases in both the Nisei and Méxica languages in the text of this story. A dictionary of military ranks is provided at the beginning of the book, and translations for a couple of songs are at the back of the book, but most of the meanings must be understood in context.

Social structure among humans is a crucial part of the plot and very well defined. However, it is unclear where non-human sentient species fall into the Méxica Empire's social strata.

Wasteland of Flint contains an interesting blend of magic and science fiction elements, and provides a new spin on traditional science fiction themes.

Possible objectionable material: None

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

Book Review: Science Fiction
The Course of Empire
By Eric Flint and K. D. Wentworth

The Jao have been conquering planets throughout the galaxy to plunder resources to use in their fight against the Ekhat, an alien race with a faction who are determined to exterminate all other forms of life in the galaxy.

The Jao conquered Earth twenty years before the start of this story, but resources remain unusable in the war due to constant native rebellion. To quiet the rebellion, Aille, a Jao prince, has been sent to Earth to command mixed troops composed of native species, and Jao warriors. Upon arrival, he is informed that mixed troops have been unsuccessful.

Aille begins his investigation into human/Jao relations and discovers that the invasion of Earth has been unusually harsh. While Aille tries to repair human/Jao relations, reports show that the Ekhat are drawing ever nearer. Unless Jao and humans can join forces to fight the Ekhat, the Earth will be destroyed.

Flint and Wentworth do an excellent job depicting the alien race, effectively portraying the differences in alien thought processes and culture. The story is paced well, and the writing is great. The characters are particularly

well-developed and grow as the story unfolds.

One element I found unnecessary and out of place in this story was the use of intimate scenes. These relationships were not a part of the central storyline and intimacy between these characters came as a bit of a surprise.

Possible objectionable material: Some strong language in a war/military context; violence and intimate scenes, neither of which are graphically described.

(Reviewed by Rochelle Buck)

Deep Magic Survey

Please take part in this month's survey. We thought that since October is the month for scary things, we'd find out what scares you. So vote for the scariest creature in fantasy!

Click here to take the survey.

Plucking Spectres

By Brendon Taylor

In the months following the birth of my third child, I never seemed to get enough sleep. I knew that was to be expected, but I was not able to keep up like I had with my first two. Genevi was bottle-fed, so I had no good excuse to shirk my turn on the night watch. Yet, even on the nights when my turn did not come until 7:00 a.m., I felt worn out. It was not just the baby. Life moved fast. Responsibilities with my job and other commitments demanded my attention. Pages on the calendar seemed to turn like a metronome keeping pace with Rachmaninoff's "Flight of the Bumblebee." Maybe if I ate better and exercised more, I would feel better. But, at the time, the couch and the remote easily won the battle with the elliptical and water bottle.

Hovering over the arm of the couch, not more than a foot from me, was a face made of gray shades.

One Saturday afternoon, I found myself at my mother's house with my wife and kids out of sight. I think my mother was playing a game with the two older kids, but I really do not recall. All I knew was that I had a quiet moment on a comfortable couch with hardly any distractions. It must have been several hours later before I stirred from a deep sleep. At first, I felt a cool breeze on my feet. It had been a warm day, so the breeze soothed me. I dozed again. The coolness turned to cold. Without waking, I shifted on the couch to keep my feet warm, but I could not avoid the cold. The window must have been left open. My hands groped, but were not able to find the blanket or afghan that commonly rested on the back and arm of the couch.

Instinct told me the thermostat was just above my head. Eye crispies stuck on my lashes, but with a couple blinks, I was able to make out the reading. Seventy degrees. Still, I was chilled on my whole left side. I tried to turn some more, but chill turned to frigid cold. As my mind cleared from slumber, I realized my wife moved about the room.

"Are you cold?" I asked.

"Not at all," she replied in a tone that reminded me I had dumped the responsibility of the children on her.

Before I could ask her to hand me a blanket, I looked to my left and saw it. My shoulders tensed as the chill raced down my spine. I had always heard that figure of speech, but that was the best way to describe what I felt. Hovering over the arm of the couch, not more than a foot from me, was a face made of gray shades. It was human in appearance, but rippled like a flag in the wind. Tattered clothes of gray and black appeared to have at some time been a military uniform, perhaps in the style of a Roman soldier. Its teeth, long and crooked, bared in a snarl and might have been yellow, if not for the wash of gray covering the apparition. But it was the eyes that sent the cold to my heart. Lifeless, hungry, and compassionless.

I could not pull my gaze from it. Part of me warned that I should protect my family, but right then, my primary concern was getting away, or making it leave. I wish my thoughts would have been more noble.

My wife stopped moving about the room and whispered, "Barry?"

Perhaps it was because I had just awakened, but what I said next was not well-conceived.

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The Geek's Guide to Grammar
Homophones and Homonyms

RULE: Homophones are words that sound the same but are spelled different and have different meanings.

Ah, homophones—among the most common mistakes in all of writing. So it's time to look at a few of the most common and make sure we're all clear on which ones should be used.

to, too, two

to – a preposition – Lancelot is going **to** the castle.
too – meaning "also" – Lancelot is in love with Gweneviere, **too**.
Two – the number "2" – Gweneviere has **two** men in love with her.

their, they're, there

their – possessive – It was **their** castle that was attacked, not that other one.
they're – contraction for "they are" – It is obvious that **they're** not happy with the King.
there – a place – We are going over there to fight with the Ogre.

its, it's

its – possessive – When I struck the giant with the sword, **its** head was cut off.
it's – contraction for "it is" – **It's** time we put an end to this.

your, you're

your – possessive – Isn't this **your** arrow sticking in my leg?
you're – contraction for "you are" - If **you're** ready, I'd like to go kill the dragon now.

Questions for The Geek

Q: I have a question about the use of "toward" versus "towards," and "forward" versus "forwards." In my writing, I tend to use "towards" and "forward," because it sounds better to me, but I wonder if this is inconsistent and therefore bad grammar. --Abby

A: The difference between "toward/towards" and "forward/forwards" is mostly that of preference and dialect. Either is perfectly acceptable. However, common usage in American English favors "toward" and "forward" whereas the British tends to use "towards" and "forwards." So you aren't wrong to use either one; whichever sounds best to you is what you should use. I tend to prefer "toward" and "forward" if that means anything. :)

Common mistake:

Probably the most common mistake is the its/it's misuse. This is because possessives are usually formed with a apostrophe followed by an "s." Not the case with **its** ("their" also doesn't follow this standard, though it is less often confused). The easy way to remember it is this: whenever you type **it's**, say the line in your head with **it's** expanded to **it is**. (When I struck the giant with the sword, **it is** head was cut off.) Of course, that's wrong, so you'd write, *its head was cut off*.

By way of clarification, homophones are different than homonyms, which are words that that have different meanings but are spelled the same. An example is the word "left," which has a different meaning in the following two sentences: [We turned **left** at the fork in the road.] [The knight accidentally **left** his best sword at home.] Bonus points (i.e. bragging rights) to the person who can email The Geek (or post it on the message boards) with a word that is both a homonym and an antonym (a word with two opposite meanings).

For a final 'homo' lesson, we have the homographs, which are words spelled the same, but with different meanings and pronunciations, such as the word "bow" (taking a **bow** after a performance or a **bow** on a present).

EMAIL THE GEEK

Peas and Carrots: Another Helping of Legal Commentary

By Brendon Taylor

As a father of three, a common theme at the dinner table is my and my wife's nagging that everyone finish, strike that, at least try some of their vegetables. Our middle daughter is particularly stubborn. "But they're good for you," we plead. "But they'll put hair on your chest," I implore. Perhaps that is why my daughter is not so anxious to give them a taste. In the end, the children normally take a few bites to satisfy us.

That is how I feel about this article. In the first sixteen issues of Deep Magic, I wrote three legal-oriented articles to rave reviews by no fewer than four people (counting my wife and mother). However, when a fellow Deep Magic editor was shopping a story this summer, she asked me to review a contract for her. I was able to translate some of the less-clear portions of the agreement and shed light on the commitments she would make by signing. She suggested I write yet another (fourth) article on the legal issues an author might encounter when reaching the contract stage of the publishing business. So, here is another helping of peas and carrots for you. Please, just try a bite. Really. I won't even mention the chest hair.

Below the term "Publishing Agreement" or some other equally wonderful title, every publishing contract from a respectable publisher will have an introductory paragraph that identifies the parties of the agreement. Then, some twenty to one hundred clauses later, the contract will end with a date and signature line for each of the parties. You might be thinking to yourself, "Great, the lawyer finished talking in three paragraphs. Must be a record." It would be. But, I'm not quite done. It is the middle twenty to one hundred paragraphs that need the explaining. For the purposes of the following sections, I will be writing primarily about book publishing contracts. Many of the themes and ideas are also relevant in magazine, e-zine, and journal publication as well.

What should you look for in a publishing contract? Many things, but I will limit this article to five areas I believe to be particularly important to authors facing publishing contracts for the first time.

1. Granting of rights in the author's work.
2. Dates for delivery of the manuscript and publication.
3. Royalties.
4. Editing and corrections clauses.
5. Options for rights in future works/right of first refusal.

Granting of Rights in the Author's Work

When encountering clauses such as these, an author should be interested in two things: scope and duration. Scope refers to the breadth of the rights conveyed through the contract. Are we talking about the right to print the work one time and sell it on Main Street in Boise, Idaho? Or, will the publisher be able to print it infinite times and sell it anywhere in the universe? What should you look for?

Look for the terms "primary rights," "secondary rights," and "subsidiary rights." Primary rights in most United States-based contracts refer to the right to publish the work in English in the United States. Secondary or subsidiary rights refer to the right to publish the work elsewhere and in other forms. Some of these other rights include "serialization" or the right to publish a work in sections in another format, usually a periodical. First serialization is the right to do that before a book is released. Second serialization occurs after publication of the book.

Another term relevant to the scope of conveyance of an author's work is called "reprint rights." These rights are often associated with the printing of the book in another, usually cheaper, form. Think mass market paperbacks. In the fantasy/sci-fi publishing genre, these are important rights and should be examined in any contract negotiation. An author should be particularly cognizant of the way the royalties flow with the introduction of reprint rights. I'll go into that more later.

At the end of this paragraph, I will list many more specific rights that might be raised in a publishing contract, but before I do, I must introduce a pair of terms any author will want to know. "Exclusive" versus "non-exclusive" rights. If an author grants the publisher *exclusive* rights in her work, she has transferred her interest in the story for the term of the contract to the extent of the granting of rights. This is not a bad thing in many cases. However, if the author wanted to retain rights in the story and be able to shop it around to other markets, she would not want to sign away exclusive rights. "Non-exclusive" means just what you think it means. The publisher is granted all the rights spelled out in the contract, but not to the exclusion of the author or another publisher obtaining the same rights. As you might expect, a publisher will almost certainly want exclusive rights in the story for at least a small period of time, and for novels, probably a very long period of time. After all, the publisher is making a significant investment by putting the work into print. Why would it want a story that might show up under a competitor's label at about the same time it is promoting the book? It won't. Now onto the list of other rights that might be discussed in the contract, which may have no effect in reality, and which I add simply to confuse you:

1. Audio Rights (Books on Tape or CD)
2. Motion Picture/Broadcast Rights
3. Book Club Rights
4. Electronic Rights (As this article is produced electronically, I trust you know what I mean)
5. Foreign Rights (Similar to "Primary" and "Secondary," but dealing with translations of the story into other languages)
6. Anthology Rights (Relevant for Short Stories)
7. Special Edition Rights (Similar to "Book Club" rights)
8. Commercial Rights (Think merchandizing, which may be a very big deal if your name is J.K. Rowling)

Getting back to the idea of "exclusive" and "non-exclusive" rights. All of these rights may be conveyed individually in the contract, or they may be wrapped up into a simple clause that "grants the publisher all rights in the work, including the exclusive right to sell, convey, transfer, publish, print, and distribute the work for the duration of the contract." If you come across such a clause in your contract, be aware that you are selling the whole enchilada to the publisher. Presuming the title of your story is "The Whole Enchilada." Seriously, such a clause may or may

not daunt you. The question you must ask is, are you willing to transfer all of the listed, and countless other unlisted, rights to the publisher. Were you really hopeful that you were going to make a nice chunk of change when "The Whole Enchilada" was published in Greek? If you have concern over such a broad conveyance, you may be well served to request advice from an agent or published author and educate yourself about whether you would be better served to grant the publisher such extensive rights in exchange for it publishing your story (and paying you royalties) or whether the publisher is asking for too much. If you are not comfortable with the terms, you can request a change. If the publisher is unwilling to make the changes you request, then you have a decision on your hands.

Back at the beginning of this section, I mentioned "duration," which refers to the amount of time the author's rights are conveyed. You might encounter anything from a period of months (particularly if you are dealing with an electronic publisher) to the full copyright term of the work. Normally, a traditional print publisher of print novels will seek much longer periods of exclusive rights. Other markets, and publishers of shorter stories, may provide any combination of exclusive/non-exclusive right terms. Some small markets may be willing to publish your work if given exclusive rights for three months and non-exclusive rights for longer periods of time. If that is the case, the publisher is protected for the short period around the release of the story by receiving assurance that its competitors will not have the story at the same time. Likewise, the publisher may then archive the story long into the future because of its non-exclusive right to do so. The author may then market the story as he desires.

Be careful. As I mentioned in a previous article, many publishers do not accept previously published work. If you encounter a phrase such as, "We buy first rights…" in the submission guidelines, your previously published work is undesirable to that publisher.

That brings us to the next area of the publishing contract I think worthy of discussion.

Dates for Delivery of the Manuscript and Publication

This topic covers two sets of dates. The first is the date for delivery of the manuscript. You might be thinking, "Brendon, this is as plain and straightforward as you lawyers usually get… do you just love typing words into your word processor as much as you love to hear yourself speak?" Yes and yes. This is a fairly plain clause in the contract, and I do enjoy a good written rant, but really, you ought to be a little more polite. I'm trying to be helpful.

The reason I bring this clause to your attention is because you do not want to miss this date. If you do, lawyers start talking about breach of contract and liquidated damages. You do not want to hear those words. If you fail to deliver the manuscript by the delivery date, the publisher can choose to not publish your story and demand repayment of the advance it has given you. But, what if I spent the advance? All I can say is that is not a happy day, and you should have paid better attention to my article. Now, not all publishers are ogres who draw joy from declaring publishing contracts void and squeezing would-be authors for the advance they paid in good faith for the author's story. Many may even be willing to grant reasonable extensions of time. The operative word being "reasonable." But, you do not want to find yourself as a new author requesting more time from the publisher that paid you to produce a manuscript last month.

The other date you might look for in the contract is the publication date. There may not be a specific time frame mentioned in the contract, but you will certainly want to know that your story will make its way to print in a reasonable amount of time. You can talk to your agent or

even your editor at the publishing company to get an idea about time frames to expect. However, the more clearly the dates are articulated in the contract, the better.

Royalties

For those of you who do not write solely for the joy/art of writing, but who would actually like to see how the money will make its way from your countless fans' wallets to yours, read on.

The simple definition of "royalty" is the payment an author receives from the publisher based on the sales of the author's book. I didn't even make a bad joke about Prince Charles here, but if you are in the mood, insert your own joke now. Royalty rates are computed in various ways, beginning with the common, simple calculation: cover price x royalty percentage x books sold = royalty. Yet, even that simple calculation can become complicated.

The royalty percentage will vary depending upon:

1. Whether the book is a hardback, trade paperback, or mass market paperback,
2. The number of sales of the book,
3. Whether a book is discounted,
4. Whether the contract provides for a "freight allowance,"
5. Returns, remainders, and
6. The ever-famous, "advance."

The type of book (trade hardback or paperback or mass market paperback) will greatly affect the percentages and amount of payment an author may expect to receive. Before talking about rates, I'll explain the three types of books mentioned. Trade hardbacks, for our purposes, are the books that cost you a good $25 to buy each time your favorite popular author's book is released by a major publisher. It also refers to books of the same size and pricing by small presses for less well-known authors. Trade paperbacks are the large soft cover versions of these novels. Mass-market paperbacks are the 4x7 soft cover books made from cheaper paper at a lower cost and are largely available at grocery stores, newsstands, and Wal-Mart. They are the books that fit into your pocket… if your pockets are large enough and your pants aren't too tight.

With those quick and loose definitions established, I'll move on to the percentages you might encounter under each. Obviously, an established author will stand a better chance at negotiating higher royalty percentages. However, even first-time authors might expect to see the following range of rates:

Trade Hardback:
10% on the first 5,000 copies
12.5% on the next 5,000 copies
15% on all sales above 10,000 copies

Trade Paperback:
6-10% on first 25,000 copies
1-2% increase on all sales above 25,000 copies

Mass Market Paperback:
4-10% (usually around 5%) on all copies sold.

You might also see provisions in publishing contracts for diminished royalties upon discounted sales. Trade publishers will often offer discounts for large orders, some of which are as high as 50% off the cover price. Thus, if the contract provides a reduced royalty for books sold at excessive discounts, the author will receive less than she might otherwise expect.

Another way publishers might hedge their expenses for discounting books is to include contract provisions excluding the author's right to a royalty on the amount of the retail price fixed as a "freight allowance." A "freight allowance" is the amount of the cover price set by the publisher to allow the bookstore to recover the shipping costs on the book. For a book that might normally be priced at $22.95, the "freight allowance" would increase the price to $24.95. The difference is the amount the bookstore keeps. The author would only earn a royalty on the $22.95 price.

I'm sure those of you who have read this far are dedicated writers who, no doubt, write beautiful, technically perfect stories that will sell more copies than the Bible. But, in the event that you are published, what happens to your royalty if significant numbers of books are returned by the retailer to the publisher? This is a legitimate concern because the publishing industry is still one that allows bookstores to do just that – return unsold copies of the books. Some bookstores are allowed to keep the books at a far reduced rate. In either event, the author may have already earned a royalty on those amounts but not be able to pay back the difference between the royalty received and the royalty after returns.

To solve this problem, many publishers have inserted clauses into their contracts to allow them to withhold a percentage of payments to authors for a "reserve against returns." Such a clause means what it says. The publisher keeps some of the money while it's flowing in right after publication and as long as it continues to flow, so that in the event of returns, the publisher can offset the losses on those books out of the reserve kept.

Another way this issue is handled is through a "remainder clause" or an "overstock clause." If the publisher is left with surplus books, it may want to sell them at a huge discount because it cannot move them any other way. I'm sure you've perused the bargain books aisle(s) at Barnes & Noble. For me, I almost always find one or more books I paid close to retail for only months earlier. Robert Jordan is a recurring example. These clauses may be written so the author gets a greatly reduced royalty for books sold at bargain prices. The author may get no such royalty at all. One variation you might pursue if it is not included is that the author be allowed to purchase any "bargain" copies of her novel from the publisher before they are sold to bookstores.

The last item I would like to discuss under the heading of "Royalties" is the "Advance," which will often be given its own separate clause. There is very little magic to uncover here, but I'm sure I can spend at least a handful of words on the subject. The advance refers to the money paid to the author by the publisher before the book sales begin to roll in. These payments are typically broken into two, three, or more chunks. Installments on the advance may be paid upon the signing of the contract, the submission of the manuscript, upon publication, or upon many other contingencies. Typically, advances are non-returnable and recoupable. The former is the good news for the author. By saying an advance is non-returnable, I mean the author usually does not have to pay the money back if the book fails to earn enough money for the publisher to cover its costs. However, the advance is recoupable, meaning the author will not see another dime of royalty until the book has sold enough copies so that the author's royalty share covers the advance he received. Obviously, an author with a great reputation and strong history of sales

will garner a larger advance and better bargaining position as to when the installments shall be paid.

Editing and Corrections Clauses

These clauses cover everything from corrections the author may/must make to the scope of editing that may be done by the publisher. These clauses lie dormant until the editor and author disagree about something in the book. Then, such clauses control who makes the decisions and how the problems are to be resolved. The thing to understand here is that with new authors, the publisher almost always has final say – so do not be alarmed if your contract grants the publisher such authority. After all, the publisher fronts the financial risk of loss for the book. A new author, in particular, has little bargaining power to exert towards maintaining editorial control, but she may seek a provision that prohibits the publisher from making material changes to the essence of the story. The stronger the author's reputation, the greater the chance that she will obtain the right for mutual consent with the publisher for changes, or even the final approval on all changes proposed by the publisher.

Remember that the written contract will be the ultimate control in the case of disputes (almost always), but that certainly does not mean that an author should not voice his opinions, strongly at times, relevant to proposed changes by his editor. Even if the contract gives the publisher the final say, you, the author, may articulate your opinions about changes. Nobody will know the story better than you, except perhaps your mother – unless your writing is too racy for her to read, so speak your mind and convince your editor why you are right…within reason.

The last time you will see your manuscript prior to publication is in the final production process. If you were not already acquainted with the term "galley proofs" you will quickly learn it. Usually, an author will be given the galley proof of his novel to review *quickly* before the book goes into print. This is the time to catch all of the final errors or forever languish over missing them when the book hits the market.

Options for Rights in Future Works/Right of First Refusal

Here we are at the last clause I chose to cover in this article/treatise. Certainly there are other important aspects of the publishing contract, but this ought be enough to cure the strongest case of insomnia.

The "option for rights in future works" and "right of first refusal" clauses govern, in part, your future relationship with the publisher. These clauses give the publisher the right to purchase your future works, but do so in different ways. The option clause allows the publisher the right to buy your future stories under the same terms as those in the current contract. That may be a good deal. But, you'll not be able to strike a better one. The option clause leaves the publisher with the option, but leaves you locked into that deal. If your relationship with the publisher truly sours, you may be able to work out some arrangement for the publisher to release you from the "option" clause in your contract, but if your stories are marketable, it will probably cost you.

The other clause is less harsh. A right of first refusal typically grants the publisher the right to buy your future work, but allows for negotiation. For example, if your first book, "The Whole Enchilada," sells like umbrellas in a rainstorm (or for those of us who live in Idaho – like snow shovels in a blizzard), then you can test the market and see what kind of a deal another

publisher might offer. Then, your original publisher has the right to match those contract terms by exercising its right of first refusal. The rub comes when your first publisher has a less prestigious reputation and lesser ability to market the novel. You may still be bound to stick with that publisher if your contract included a "right of first refusal" clause.

These clauses should be given serious consideration and may be worth negotiating, to the extent that the publisher is willing to sway on them. At a minimum, it would be helpful if a time is set for the publisher to exercise the clause. That way, you are not left waiting for the publisher to decide whether to match an offer by its competitor for months on end.

Let me make one last, parting suggestion. If you have questions about a publishing contract, seek good legal advice by a lawyer licensed to practice law in the state where you live. Literary agents, who are often lawyers, are another excellent resource. Please do not construe what I have written in this article as legal advice. I have attempted to discuss a handful of general legal themes that arise in publishing contracts, but I have not intended to give any reader specific advice. Hey, I wouldn't be a lawyer if I didn't include a couple disclaimers, right?

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The Rise
By Sarah Dobbs

PART THREE
SIX

Who is it? Who's my spell teacher, Markooth? Please tell me it's not who I think it is.

"Hello," Ry-anne said as Markooth let her inside the North Wing. It was certainly much shabbier than she had expected. Should not the Grand live in opulent surroundings, her every whim attended? Apparently not.

Markooth spread warmth her way.

"So who's my teacher?"

"You know," Markooth said and beckoned her to follow him up the stairs. She grabbed his wrist.

"I can't. No. I can't do this—I can't breathe."

Easy, you will be fine, he soothed.

How would you know?

"Come on, Ry-anne. Just get the first meeting over with."

She had no time to cast back; every moment was precious as she struggled to remember spell classes.

"Holy Grand," she murmured. There were brown walls after brown walls—simply nothing to catch the eye. But plenty to make her contemplate her own grim future. At thirteen, it wasn't something she should be doing. She should be thinking about jumping in the lake and splashing her Pair and falling in love and…

"Here we are."

The door was heavy oak. A ghosting of dust covered it, and it was so old that it was split. There was a knot right by the handle. *Like the one in my stomach,* she thought. Black and ugly.

Go on. I'll be right here, Markooth reassured her.

Her heart thumped in her throat, giving her good cause to vomit. She placed one sweaty palm on the wooden knob. It screeched as she twisted it and took a brave step inside. The power hit like a gale and made her bones rattle. The door slammed behind and her hair blasted back. The ceiling swam into the floor and she crashed down. An efficient grey man attended her. Her heart was close to bursting and the tears leaked out of her eyes. The man was a Guard, noted by the three tattooed stripes of black slashed across his left eye—something Markooth would soon receive. With his help, she got up.

The Grand. She sat resplendent in a plain wooden chair, no different than the ones in the meal room. There were no furnishings in the room and only one window that looked out onto the grounds. The wood around the window was splintered and had not been varnished for some Seasons. The air seemed musty and old but The Grand, she was a queen on a throne.

Not many people ever saw her these days. Ry-anne certainly hadn't—unless the statue counted. *Oh Grand, will I have a statue?* That was a strange idea.

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Procyx Book Three

By O.R. Savage

Chapter Three
Lost Masters

I

The Black Arts, Goren had learned from Jzherillza, included the ability to immobilize one's enemies and prey by projecting a paralyzing fear into them. Now, at the threshold of the great, dark vessel, Goren turned his emotional spoilers up to full power, just in case. No matter how his men already inside might be feeling, they must see nothing but confidence from *him*. He glided serenely into the Ark of Hurd.

And felt an immediate flood of gloom upon entering.

He glanced down at the spoiler readouts and saw readings that showed a definite, turbulent barrage of artificial, emotional disruption everywhere about him.

"Men," he bolstered his troops. "Any uneasiness—any fear you may be feeling now is, I assure you, COMPLETELY ARTIFICIAL—fabricated. Do you understand? It is not real. Do not trouble yourselves with it. You are my *Invincibles*—my best! I know that you are holding your positions with incredible bravery against a powerful fear and waves of fatalism. But know this—and it is true; the fear—the anxiety you feel are nothing but fabrication. You may safely ignore them."

A sleek, gray, feminine form glided gracefully among the worms, her long hair beautiful. She turned to look up at him with what turned out to be one of two heads.

Goren's throne eased into the interior of the Ark of Hurd. The inside of this vessel was like an immense cavern lined with some sort of wet-looking, honeycombed material. He regarded it uneasily. Portastrobes had been set up at intervals, spreading their rose-colored light everywhere, but as Goren studied them it seemed as if their illumination was far dimmer than it should have been.

"Great One," the Invincibles commander tranzed him. "Some of my men are on the verge of breakdowns—not withstanding your speech. What should I do with them?"

Goren thought a moment, beginning to glide down the huge, seemingly endless, dark, honeycombed corridor. "Tell them to shoot themselves up with whatever they need to hold their posts. But I don't want a whole army of men whose reaction times are dimmed in any way by drugs. Understand? And, curse it, I don't want any of them drugging off to sleep and drifting into something. I want you to drop the first sleeper you see. Too much is at stake here for any lesser disciplinary action. You can tell them that's what will happen to them if they sleep off, if you wish."

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Cover them in dulcet tones,
Cloak their evil nature.
Sleep, most primitive of aspects,
Touch them now, these wicked foemen,
These blackened souls of ice,
Loan to me the force of dreams,
That the Sampo might be captured,
And Louhi's power broken."

The song was followed by a deep and perfect silence.

"A pleasant enough tune, old man," Illmarinen whispered, "but did it work?"

"It worked," Vainamoinen said wearily, returning his kantele to its pouch. "But Louhi is . . . formidable. The question now is, how long shall it last?"

Illmarinen laid his huge smith's hand on the wizard's shoulder. "Long enough, I hope." Vainamoinen heard his oldest friend turn. "It is done," Illmarinen said.

It was all he needed to say. Like wraiths, the Finnish sons of Kaleva, the finest sailors and warriors in the world, strode the desolate shores of the Northland.

"Wait," Vainamoinen said, when all the men were ashore. "There is one last thing." The wizard turned to face the ships. The words he whispered went unheard by the men, but when he reached the end the great ships vanished, as though they had never been. There were whispers behind him, muttered prayers. The men knew him, knew what he could do and trusted him. But still. Still.

Vainamoinen turned and nodded to Illmarinen. Then, together, the eighty men of Finland began their quest to retrieve the greatest treasure of all.

* * *

The Finnish warrior-crews followed the wall east and south, away from the water's edge and into the surrounding mountains. The narrow path they followed was steep, and thick with snow. It ran beside the wall and skirted the edge of a black-green forest that wound its way upward into the mountains. Though the men had traveled for hours—well beyond the normal boundaries of night—the sun did not brighten the inky horizon.

Vainamoinen knew it never would. It was one of the oldest laws: The sun never shone in Pohjola. Ever. The strangeness of the macabre night was heightened by the unnatural silence that clung to the mountain's slopes. A silence of his own fashioning. In all the wide, white Northland, not a single sound was heard over the snow-muffled sounds of their ascent. No bird sang of their passing, no beast called from the shadows. Pohjola slept a restless sleep.

But for how long?

Against his will, his breath coming in harsh, white gasps, Vainamoinen cast his gaze upward to the mountain. High above them, its jagged peak lost in swirling mists of ice and snow, Ilma towered. Its silent presence was like a great and dreadful burden. The mountain was impossibly vast and daunting, a looming shadow that stood proof against the ever-encroaching Sea. If Kuura was the heart of the North, Ilma was its soul.

It was also where they had to go.

"How much further, old man?" Illmarinen asked.

"Some ways yet, I fear. Perhaps it would be a good time to stop?"

"Hmph." Illmarinen turned. "Tarves," he said to the large man who had captained the second vessel, "we will rest here."

Tarves grunted. Vainamoinen heard the burly captain issue a set of terse orders over the moaning wind. It was not long before his men cleared an area just off the path. As the men began piling wood, Tarves approached the wizard.

Though a full head taller than Vainamoinen and twice as broad the captain, who had braved more war and death than most men, refused to meet Vainamoinen's steady gaze. When Tarves spoke, his voice was low and his eyes were fixed on the snowy earth.

"The fire," the warrior-captain began uncertainly, "it will not . . .?"

From within the folds of his heavy cloak, the wizard smiled. "No, the glow of the fire will not wake the mountain."

He saw Tarves look discomfited. Vainamoinen laid a wrinkled hand on the captain's shoulder. "You have done well in getting your men here, captain, but we've much work still ahead. Have the men eat quickly; we cannot know how much time we have. And I cannot do this thing alone."

Tarves raised his bearded face and, for the first time, met Vainamoinen's gaze. The old man let a small smile reach his eyes. He knew what the captain was looking for, knew what Tarves needed. For an instant, Vainamoinen was not the Wizard of the North, not the son of a goddess. Not the hero of legend who discomfited even the strongest of warriors. For that instant, the instant Vainamoinen let his closely guarded humanity shine through his eyes, he was a frail old man, filled with faults, lonely and desperate, in need of forgiveness and a way to make amends.

Vainamoinen could see the seaman was surprised by what he saw, by the vulnerability and the manifest need. The captain seemed to search for a moment, to plumb the wizard's ancient gaze. Then Tarves' weathered face relaxed, and he gave a single nod.

"Good," Vainamoinen said.

When Tarves walked back to the fire, his head was high.

"That was well done," Illmarinen said from the shadows, where he sat atop a boulder which protruded from the thigh-deep snow. The smith had a large piece of salted fish in one beefy hand and a flask of half-frozen water in the other. Illmarinen's ruddy-brown smith's skin seemed proof against the bitter cold.

Vainamoinen smiled. "Why well done? Tarves saw a part of me. Who's to say it was not the truer part?"

"Truer? Perhaps. But it was not the part so feared by the dark, not the part that sang the Northland into slumber. And it was not the part that shall regain the Sampo."

"Yet, no less true for all of that. Else we would not be here at all."

"Bah," Illmarinen said, casting the skeletal remains of his meal upon the ground. "Let go, old man, it is done. Shall you punish yourself forever?"

The wind whispered through the trees. Its cold, cruel touch seemed to freeze the wizard's marrow. Hitching his cloak, unable to ward the chill that seemed to burrow deep into his ancient, aching bones, Vainamoinen said, "Yes, I think I shall."

Neither man spoke after that.

Moments later, as quickly as the small fire was raised, it was extinguished, and the Finns continued their arduous trek up the slumbering slopes.

* * *

"There," Vainamoinen said.

They came to rest atop a broad, icy plateau. The wind atop the rise was an ice-toothed demon. Beneath them, the Northland stretched like a shadow at dusk. At their side, the ever-present wall continued veering south, where it became lost among the icy crags and arctic pines of Ilma's callous face.

"Where?" Tarves cried over the wind. "I see nothing!"

Vainamoinen whispered, "You will." Then the wizard began to sing.

It was a quiet song, a song of lost things and the void left by their passing. With infinite care, Vainamoinen shaped a sorrow in the silence of that unending night, and an apology for what must come next.

His cadence changed. No sorrow this time, no apologies. His song was a wizard's song, powerful and demanding, an incessant dictate that brooked nothing save compliance.

Beneath the feet of the seamen, the mountain trembled.

Vainamoinen heard Tarves: "Gods of the Sea, what is happening?"

Then Illmarinen's reply: "The mountain is unwilling to relinquish its secret. Vainamoinen is convincing it otherwise."

Indeed, though it seemed the mountain would need further convincing. Vainamoinen raised his voice. His song was unremitting, a command that could not be refused.

And it was not, not on that night, while the Northland and its malice slept its restless sleep.

With a sigh that may or may not have been the wind, Ilma forfeited its greatest secret, and a small fissure opened in the stony face of the mountain.

Despite the bitter cold, sweat rolled down the wizard's haggard face. Vainamoinen turned to meet the waiting, anxious gaze of his closest friend. He managed a wan smile and a nod.

Illmarinen's grey eyes gleamed as he turned to the men who stood silently gaping at the narrow passage. "Tarves," the smith cried, struggling to be heard over the harrowing wind. Vainamoinen watched the captain approach. "The old man and I," Illmarinen said, "shall lead half the men into the mountain. Take the rest and make what camp you might, then wait for us. Time is a difficult thing to judge in this sunless place, my friend. It falls to you to decide when you have waited long enough."

Tarves nodded.

"Good. Ukko watch over you."

"And you," Tarves said.

Then, trudging through the heavy snow, Illmarinen and Vainamoinen led forty of their men up the rise and into the mountain.

* * *

The narrow passage, scarcely wide enough for five men to walk abreast, sloped steeply down into darkness. Several of the men carried flickering torches that cast their shadows ahead of them into the waiting gloom. The only sounds that disturbed the grave silence imposed by the winding passage were the scraping, back-and-forth shifting of swords and the soft echo of goatskin boots on stone.

Vainamoinen could feel the oppressive weight of the mountain above their heads like mounting dread, could sense the darkness that beckoned, silently, beyond the red-orange glow of

the torches' light. Among the men, darkness and stone worked together in that forbidden place to fashion a deep, primal fear. Vainamoinen could see it in their furtive glances, in the way the battle-hardened men drew closer to each other. He could smell it in their sweat. Beside him, even Illmarinen was strangely quiet.

And so, to dispel the funereal silence and the fear, Vainamoinen sang. The wizard's song was a panacea in the dark loneliness of the mountain. It was also a common song, a tavern song, a song the men knew, a song of battles fought and won, of brave men and the courage that made them heroes. By the second verse, a score of quiet voices joined him. By the third, all of them sang, their voices no longer quiet, but ringing proudly, bravely, through the passage. Carrying away their fear. Vainamoinen let his voice fade to silence before the song was ended. He listened intently, and with a certain pride, as the loyal crew continued on through the next verse, and the next.

When the song was at last ended, the men spoke again, and laughed; they joked as men familiar with danger do. A reminder that not every song was a secret song, like every word was not. And yet, even the simplest tune could weave a profound magic, if it mattered enough. The wizard allowed himself a small smile at the thought.

"Surely you can do better than that?" Illmarinen said.

Vainamoinen turned to the brother of his soul. "Not until this is finished."

Illmarinen's smile faded then, and the huge smith grunted. Neither man spoke again as they followed the passage deeper into darkness.

* * *

It was some time later when the passage opened and they found the door.

"At last," Vainamoinen said.

The chamber into which the passage opened was vast, easily large enough to hold them all. The red-orange light of the dozen or so torches barely reached the roughly hewn walls of the cavern, or the door directly across from them. The light did not reach the ceiling, which was lost in darkness.

With great, silent care, Vainamoinen led the men into the empty cavern. As they drew closer, the light of the crackling flames crawled across the floor and up the door, and Vainamoinen was able to see it clearly for the first time. Fashioned of wood, the ancient door stood twice as tall as Vainamoinen himself. Thick, black, iron bands across the top and bottom secured the wooden slats, and lent the door an air of infinite solidity. There was no window, no handle, not even a lock was set in place. Around the outside edges of the door, nine symbols were etched deeply into the wood. The symbols were black and gave the appearance of having been burned into the wooden face.

A smoking torch held firm in his huge hand, Illmarinen stepped toward the door and closely examined the symbols. "What are they?" he asked at last.

"The Nine Locks," Vainamoinen said.

Illmarinen turned to him.

Vainamoinen said nothing as he stepped forward. For long, silent moments, he examined each symbol. Without touching them, he traced the outline of each, muttering and whispering as he did. When he was finished, the Wizard of Light stepped back from the door. With a breath he said, "Colic."

The pronunciation of the Name was like a burden dropped upon his shoulders. But he

watched the bottom symbol vanish in a cloud of ash and dust.

Vainamoinen heard the gasps of the men behind, heard the quick, muttered prayers to Ukko and the Sea. He felt them back away. Even Illmarinen stepped back.

"Consumption," Vainamoinen said. And a second symbol vanished.

"Pleurisy. Cancer. Ulcer." Three more symbols gone, and the burden grew.

"Fever." And another vanished. Vainamoinen struggled to stand upright in the face of the Naming.

"Gout. Sterility." Two more disappeared, destroyed by the secret, undeniable power of their Names.

Leaving only one.

Strained sweat streaked his face, meandered down his aged cheeks to gather in the fullness of his hoary beard. His breath came faster, and his muscles ached desperately.

Illmarinen stepped up beside him. "What are they?" the smith asked, laying a steadying hand on the wizard's thin shoulder.

"The Nine Diseases," Vainamoinen said.

More gasps from the men as Illmarinen's grip on his shoulder tightened. Vainamoinen could feel fear, like a specter, rising all around him.

They had reason to fear. The Nine Diseases, from which all others sprang, were dark and terrible things. Louhi had reached deep in her fashioning. There was enormous power here. Too much power. This should have been beyond even Louhi. Though he recognized the ancient, secret symbols, though he knew their Names and so could banish them, Vainamoinen himself could not have scribed those symbols.

No mortal could have done so.

But no mortal had ever before wielded the Sampo. No matter. Whatever Louhi's power, whatever her goal, it ended with his coming here, with his reaching this place. Though he would carry the burden of his shame forever, he could make this one thing right. It was not enough, not by far, but it was something.

Staring at the final symbol, Vainamoinen fought against the weight of the Names. In a loud, strong voice, he proclaimed, "Plague," and the last of the symbols vanished.

A silence as deep as the darkness of a moonless night descended on the cavern at the pronouncement of the last Name. Into that silence, the chamber sighed.

And the door swung wide.

Vainamoinen groaned and collapsed to a knee as the burden vanished. The effort of the Naming however, remained.

Illmarinen was beside him in an instant, a flask of cool water in his outstretched hand. The wizard gulped the water greedily. It had been a long time since he felt so drained. The calling forth of a Name, a true Name, a Name that shaped and defined a thing absolutely, was a difficult task. The older the Name, the more closely guarded its nature and the more difficult it was to shape. And the Nine Diseases were a deep and terrible secret. As he continued to drink, desperately, Vainamoinen knew it would take some time for him to feel strong again.

Time he, all of them, did not have.

"Well done," Illmarinen said.

Vainamoinen managed a wan smile. "Save your praise, my friend. We have only just begun."

With Illmarinen's help, Vainamoinen struggled to his feet. "I shall need you here," he whispered, "with the men. I cannot say for certain what lies beyond the door. Should I have need

of you . . ."

"We will be ready," Illmarinen finished. "I understand. Just don't be long; you know how impatient I get. And I would hate to have to go in there and save you."

Vainamoinen laid a hand on his spirit brother's broad shoulder and smiled. When he felt sure he could stand on his own, Vainamoinen crossed the chamber. Before he reached the door, the wizard glanced at one of the men holding a torch. Without a word, the man handed his torch to Vainamoinen.

"Thank you," Vainamoinen said.

Then, without a backward glance, the ancient wizard walked to the door and stepped through the open threshold.

Where the greatest treasure in the world waited in the darkness.

* * *

The darkness that permeated the chamber was more than an absence of light. It devoured the torch's illumination like a carnivore. Though the flame was high, the harsh light barely illuminated the fingers of Vainamoinen's outstretched hand. And as it devoured light, the suffocating darkness also devoured sound. The crackle-snap of the torch was a smothered whisper. His footfalls on the stone, the swish of his robes, even his own labored breath, were all silent. Vainamoinen had long since lost sight of the opening that led back to the cavern, had long since ceased to hear the voices of the loyal men who waited for his return.

It had been a long time since he had felt so utterly, terrifyingly alone. But he remembered that time, knew that for as long as he drew breath, he would never forget . . .

It had been a night much like the one that awaited him beyond the mountain. Cold, dark, full of awful promise and despair. He had just set out in his small copper vessel. He had needed time to think, to get away. After Aino's death—oh, Aino!—he had spent a great deal of time trying to get away. Alone with his kantele, Vainamoinen followed the meandering shores of his homeland of Wainola. Allowing the wind and waves to carry him where they would, Vainamoinen began to sing:

"What has happened to the cuckoo,
Once the cuckoo bringing gladness,
In the morning, in the evening,
Often bringing joy at noontide?
What has stilled the cuckoo's singing,
What has changed the cuckoo's calling?
Sorrow must have stilled his singing,
And compassion changed his calling,
As I hear him sing no longer,
For my pleasure in the morning,
For my happiness at evening.
Never shall I learn the secret,
How to live and how to prosper,
How upon the earth to rest me,
How upon the seas to wander!
Mother, advise me,

What my thought and what my action,
That this cup of grief might pass me,
That this sorrow might escape me,
And this darkened cloud pass over."

So lost was he in song, so heavy was his ancient heart, that the mightiest wizard in the world never sensed the arrow, poison-tipped, that pierced the night air and sought his life.

On certain nights, Vainamoinen thought, he could still feel it, the cold iron of the barb that pierced his shoulder just above his broken heart. He had staggered in the boat, his kantele slipping from his numbing grasp. He remembered staring outward through darkening vision at the distant shore. It had been a wonderful cast, almost impossible in that light, over that distance.

He stumbled, reached out to grip the side of the reeling vessel. The cold no longer reached him and the ache in his heart seemed less than it had been. He wondered whom he had to thank, who had done him this good turn and ended all his suffering?

His strength finally giving way, Vainamoinen toppled headlong into the arms of the waiting sea. As he lay there, his life's red blood flowing freely into the greedy Sea, the weight of his cloak seeking to draw him down into the briny depths, a song, sad in its way, reached out to him and answered all his questions:

"Nevermore, old Vainamoinen,
Nevermore in all thy life-time,
While the golden moonlight glistens,
Nevermore wilt fix thy vision,
On the meadows of Wainola,
On the plains of Kalevala.
Slain the son of Wainola,
who now may plow the ocean,
now may sweep the waters,
On the billows rock and slumber,
In the salt-sea sleep forever?
Thus is Aino's death revenged,
and Joukahainen now may rest."

Of course. It had been the most obvious thing in the world. As Vainamoinen closed his eyes, as the black water claimed him as its own, he marveled that he had not understood it all along; that he had never suspected it might end this way.

Aino's brother, Joukahainen. Joukahainen, whom he had defeated in a battle of song, whom his anger had brought him near to killing.

Until Joukahainen had offered the life of his sister in exchange for his own. And Vainamoinen, old and alone, so terribly alone, had accepted.

How could he have known she was already betrothed? How could he have known that, rather than dishonor her lover or her brother, she would drown herself in a stream in the forest behind her home?

It was just, this ending.

It was just! He had deserved his end! Joukahainen's vengeance should have sufficed!

Had it not been for the giant eagle that descended from the night and carried him away, it would have sufficed. But no, that too, was unfair. Such an end would have been too simple, too simple by far. He needed to suffer before his end; he had not carried his burden long enough. When the eagle dropped him on the distant, broken shores of Pohjola, Vainamoinen knew his suffering was just about to begin.

Two months, he found out from Illmarinen, later. Two months he had been lost. Two months of pain and agony, two months of nightmare and fever and wishing he had died. The poison had been terrible, insidious. The aggrieved youth had chosen well. For weeks Vainamoinen had not even known where he was. His memories of that time, when the fever held him fast, were dark and frightened him still. He had never been more vulnerable in his life than at that time. He still could not say how the Crone saved him, what dark magicks she used to keep him alive. His ignorance, he knew, was a blessing.

She was seated beside his bed when his fever broke and his eyes opened, rocking back and forth in an ancient rocking chair. Toothless, monstrous, her dead skin the color of an approaching storm, she was a beast from a nightmare. Something thick and yellow gathered at the corners of her ocher eyes, seeped slowly down her dried, seabed face. The stringy white hair atop her head was sparse, matted in places by ages old dirt and sweat. Her tiny arms were shriveled and ruined, like the legs of a bird, but her wiry hands clung to the arms of her chair with a frightening strength. In all his long, long life, Vainamoinen had only ever seen one other to match her, but that meeting came much later.

"I am Louhi," said the abominable Hag of the North. "I have saved your life."

And with those simple words, Vainamoinen's doom was fashioned.

In his mind, Louhi's words were always accompanied by the metal clang of a cell door closing. They influenced every action he took from that day forward, and defined his life. Or, rather, his need to respond to them had done so.

"How shall I repay you?" he had asked, had been required by honor to ask.

Stooping down, the Hag of Pohjola grabbed a small, bound sack and tossed it to him. "You shall sing the Sampo for me," Louhi answered.

Vainamoinen stared at the Hag as he opened the sack.

"Yes. Look, look what I have given you. Look, and you will see."

When the sack was unfastened, a shaft of brilliant light erupted from its unbound end. Vainamoinen dropped the bag on the bed and quickly raised a hand to his face.

"A captured shaft of light," Louhi said, "from the Pole Star, about which the Universe revolves. With infinite care, I stole it from the Lake where it rested as a reflection. But there is more."

Fear gripped Vainamoinen as he stared at Louhi. He reached his hand into the bag. His eyes grew wide at what he felt. When the wizard withdrew his hand, it appeared to be empty.

Louhi smiled her toothless grin.

"I can . . . feel it," Vainamoinen said, peering hard at his empty hand. "All unseen it blows cold across my palm. What . . .?"

"A fragment of the North Wind that blows across the Iron Gates of my land," Louhi said. "For as the wind is undying, so too shall be the power of my Sampo. But look, there is one thing more, the most special thing of all."

Closing his hand about the wind, Vainamoinen reached once more into the bag of wonders. This time, he withdrew a single, tiny seed.

The wizard stared at the small seed. Understanding came in a flash of horror.

"Yes," Louhi whispered, leaning forward to glimpse the tiny seed. "You recognize it, do you not? You sense its power. It is a seed from the fruit of the Tree."

Vainamoinen gasped. "It . . . cannot be."

"Fool, of course it can be."

"But, All-Father Ukko has forbidden it. How did you—"

"Ukko, too, is a fool. A blind, frightened fool. Ukko fears the Tree, fears its power. But, though Ukko would keep the Tree hidden, there are other gods, younger, some as powerful as Ukko himself, who care nothing for the All-Father's wishes."

Staggered, Vainamoinen whispered, "Other gods?"

Louhi laughed. "Poor, deluded fool. The Universe is filled with Gods! Old Gods and young, powerful and meek. Gods of Light and Gods of Shadow. One such god was Wotan, the Gallow's God, He-Who-Has-Hung-From-the-Tree. With Wotan's aid I found the Tree and plucked a single fruit. From that perfect fruit I plucked a single seed. A seed to give life and breath to my Sampo, to help it grow, powerful and strong, infinitely strong, like the Tree from which it shall be spawned! And all it cost me, this single, precious seed, was my daughter's soul." With the prolonged slowness of age, Louhi raised her spindly arm, pointed out the window of the room in which Vainamoinen lay.

With a mighty effort, Vainamoinen sat up. For a moment his head swam. When his vision cleared he followed the hag's outstretched finger. Outside his chamber the grizzled sky frowned upon Pohjola. The brown grass and dead trees that awaited his scrutiny made Vainamoinen wonder if the sun ever shone in Pohjola. At the time, he had no way of knowing it never did. Beyond the dead and dying plain, a wall of invincible iron stretched its black arms around the land. Vainamoinen followed it as far as his eye could see, until it wound its way upward, into the forested mountains that bounded Pohjola to the North. Beyond the implacable wall of iron, the sable waters of a lake washed up onto a cracked and rocky shore. Leaning forward, Vainamoinen cast his gaze along the shore.

His heart stopped when he saw the tree. A great, withered oak, leafless and gnarled, bent its mighty branches over the foul waters of the lake.

And from the largest branch, her feet dangling over the black water, a woman hung.

Even in the darkness, Vainamoinen could see that the tips of her hands and feet were tattered, food for any malign thing that swooped from the sky or leapt out of the water. Her naked body swayed gently in the icy breeze, and large tufts of her hair had been pulled out. What remained of the princess of Pohjola's face was an eyeless ruin.

Vainamoinen retched.

"Your concern is touching," Louhi said, "but unnecessary. Lomatar went willingly to her death, a noble, worthy sacrifice to Wotan."

Vainamoinen laid back and closed his eyes.

"Yes," the Queen of Pohjola said, "rest. You shall need your strength when you use these things I have given you to sing the Sampo to life. With your perfect voice and your heart of Light, you shall sing the soul of the *axis mundi*, the Cosmic Tree, and then you shall give it to me that I might make Pohjola a perfect, perfect world. To this task I bind you, as payment for saving your life."

Vainamoinen shook his head. "No, no," he said, unable to grasp the full, unfettered power of his doom. Then, with eyes closed tight, the wizard rasped, "I cannot do this thing for you, it is beyond me."

"Liar!" screeched the hag. "You lie!"

Vainamoinen shook his head. “I tell you truthfully, upon my binding: this task is beyond me. But, I know of one, a smith. With these . . . desecrations,” he spat, “he shall fashion the artifact you seek. But it shall take time.”

Louhi laughed. “Very well. Take my trinkets to your smith, have him forge my Sampo. But remember: your soul is bound to me until your life-debt is paid. When the smith has finished, and the Sampo is mine, only then shall your soul once more know freedom. You will know the price, if you fail me. Rest now, for you leave with the coming dawn.”

He had done all that had been asked of him. He had taken the profane sack to Illmarinen, who spent nine days and nights forging the Sampo. All the while, as the smith worked his unearthly metals, Vainamoinen sang. For nine days and nights he sang a song of Life, and with Louhi’s forbidden magic at its heart, Illmarinen had shaped the Sampo, while Vainamoinen had sung its soul.

Then, in payment for his life, he had given the Sampo to Louhi.

The memory made him cringe. Their task complete, wizard and smith had made a pact before Vainamoinen returned to Pohjola and left the Sampo in Louhi’s withered hand.

“You are free,” Louhi had told him. “Go now, and never return to Pohjola.”

Vainamoinen did go then, as he was asked to do.

He was not gone long. He and his spirit brother had a pact to uphold. It was why he was here, in this mountain where Light was forbidden to tread, in this chamber that hid the treasure he had allowed to be.

Vainamoinen had the sense, as he walked through the stifling darkness of the chamber, that one could become lost in this place. And if lost, never found again. The thought brought urgency to his weary step. So, to combat the darkness and his own mounting fear, Vainamoinen did the only thing he could do. He sang.

“Ilmatar, daughter of the Ether,
Ancient mother of my being,
Loan to me the light-forces,
Great the powers of the light;
Loan to me the strength of stars,
To upset this encompassing darkness,
To chase these shades of evil,
That again may shine the sunlight,
That the Sampo stand revealed.”

Then, like a million, million ants, the darkness, grudgingly, gave way.

In the light of the torch, the Sampo stood revealed.

No, not the Sampo. Something else. Vainamoinen approached a small stone pedestal in the center of the chamber. With the darkness dispelled, the chamber stood revealed as little more than a rough hollow, barely large enough for a score of men. The pedestal at its center reached Vainamoinen’s waist. Atop the squat column was a wooden chest. The spartan chest, no larger than an infant child, was iron-banded and wrapped in coils of thick chain. A massive bronze lock at the front of the chest held the chain in place and secured the chest to a large iron ring driven into the pedestal. A small symbol was scribed upon the lock.

Vainamoinen frowned. “Illmarinen,” he called.

Behind him, the wizard heard Illmarinen enter the chamber.

"We watched the darkness flee. Have you found—" The smith fell silent when he noticed the box. "Hmm," Illmarinen said.

Vainamoinen watched the great smith silently and thoroughly examine the chest. When he was finished, Illmarinen said, "Very fine. I see precious little weakness. Seldom have I seen such craftsmanship. Almost as good as mine."

Vainamoinen smiled. "Can you break it?"

"Perhaps." Illmarinen's eyes narrowed. "Is the symbol on the lock so strong?"

"It is strong. Strong enough that the effort to unmake it might be greater than we can afford."

"I see. Still, I shall need your help. Can you heat the iron?"

Vainamoinen nodded. Then, under his breath, the wizard began to sing.

And the iron began to glow.

As he sang, Vainamoinen watched his friend circle the chest. Illmarinen inspected each link in the chain with a master's eye. And Illmarinen was a master, the greatest smith in the world.

"Hmm, very good, indeed," the smith said, kneeling before the chest. He pulled his dagger from his boot, and one of his hammers from his belt. With great care, he placed the blade against the warm chain, and with a delicacy that belied his massive bulk, tapped the hilt of the dagger. A part of the glowing chain fell away. "But not quite good enough."

And so it went, each of the chain's minute weaknesses revealed through song, and exploited by the only one who might have found them. In the end, the heavy chain was in pieces upon the pedestal and all that remained was the lock.

Wizard and smith exchanged glances. Behind them, and very quietly, several of the men, drawn by Illmarinen's careful study and Vainamoinen's song, began to enter the chamber.

"This shall be more difficult," Illmarinen said, examining the lock. "Can you bind the symbol?"

Vainamoinen considered for a moment. "Yes," he said. "Not for long, but I can bind it. You will have to work quickly."

Illmarinen nodded and turned. "Tero, your necklace."

The warrior named Tero stared at the smith.

"I promise, I shall not harm it."

Uncertain, Tero slowly pulled the fishbone necklace from around his neck and handed it to the smith. Illmarinen fingered one of the long, sharp pieces of bone. "This will do," he said. "Ready?"

Vainamoinen nodded, and once again began to sing. At the start of his song the symbol on the lock began to pulse, very faintly, like a silver heart. Sweat fell from the wizard's furrowed brow as he whispered his song. He fought to keep his hands and arms from trembling. After a moment, the symbol grew quiet at the wizard's incessant words and settled down to a faint and steady glow. Still singing under his breath, sweat streaking his face and stinging his eyes, Vainamoinen nodded.

Illmarinen plunged the narrow piece of bone into the magical lock.

The trembling in Vainamoinen's arms grew worse. The wizard threw all his focus into the song. He watched Illmarinen's deft hands work the lock, poking and prodding and turning, for what seemed an eternity. Then he saw the smith smile.

And heard the lock click.

Vainamoinen's song ended, and the wizard collapsed to the ground.

"Vainamoinen?"

The wizard heard the concern in Illmarinen's voice as two men quickly knelt down beside him. Vainamoinen shook his head. "I . . . am fine," he said, his breath coming in quick, heaving gasps. "The chest, open the chest." Vainamoinen looked up in time to see Illmarinen carefully remove the opened lock and set in down on the pedestal beside the chest. With the two men beside him, Vainamoinen watched his brother lift the heavy iron lid.

"Ah," Illmarinen said.

Then Illmarinen reached in and withdrew the Sampo.

It was smaller than Vainamoinen remembered. Even by the crude light of the torch, the Sampo's many-colored lid glittered like a universe of stars. A perfectly formed cube, the Sampo fit comfortably in Illmarinen's large hands. The image of a tree was inlaid on its face; its thick roots flowed along the bottom of each of the box's four side panels. Above the tree, at the top of the face, a brilliant star shone down.

"Ah," Illmarinen said.

Vainamoinen nodded and took a step toward the smith and the Sampo. "Indeed. And now that we have what we came for we can—" Exhausted still, from the Names, and the lock, the wizard's ancient legs collapsed beneath him. Vainamoinen cried out and stumbled to the ground.

Instinctively, out of concern and fear for the wizard's safety, the two men who stood beside him rushed forward to once again offer their support.

But it was a small chamber, and they were very near the pedestal.

Too near.

The larger man, Ivalo, son of a drowned fisherman and a mother who died shortly after the terrible battle that brought him kicking and screaming into the world, did not see the lock that rested on the edge of the pedestal, did not, in truth, even feel it when his hip nudged the lock and sent it tumbling over the side.

Fate had not been kind to Ivalo Korhonen, or his family, and there were many moments in his life that he wished he might have back, that he wished he might change. But, of all the moments that made up Ivalo Korhonen's hard, unfair life, it was this one moment above all others that he would come to wish he could have back.

Time slowed as the lock fell. Vainamoinen watched it fall with a perfect, crystal clarity. In that instant, he saw many things clearly.

The look of despair on Illmarinen's face.

The look of shock on the face of the large man—Ivalo, Vainamoinen thought the warrior's name was—who bumped the lock while trying to help Vainamoinen overcome his own cursed weakness.

Torchlight reflecting off the lock which fell like a star, like his hopes and dreams.

The end of all their efforts.

Death and carnage.

The lock struck the ground and snapped closed. It was a sound the wizard would remember for a long time.

"No," Illmarinen said.

Then the symbol began to glow, and the mountain, the North Land, awoke.

* * *

It was a night the battle-hardened, war-forged men of Finland never forgot. Years, decades

later, those who survived still refused to talk about it, refused to relive, even in the imperfect halls of memory, the sights and sounds that hunted them through that long, terrible night.

"Run," Illmarinen said, after the lock closed and the powers of the North were awakened.

And they did. Vainamoinen, Illmarinen, and the forty loyal men who followed them into the cave to recover a treasure with the power to reshape the world. They all ran.

But they could not run fast enough to escape the mountain, or its wrath.

Ivalo half carried Vainamoinen as he and Illmarinen followed the streaming warriors out of the small chamber, through the outer cavern, and into the long passageway that led to freedom.

It was while they were in the passage that the shadows came to life. They slipped free from the stone walls like phantoms. In the flickering light of the torches, the shadows were almost men. Almost.

"Beware their touch!" Vainamoinen cried. The wizard thrust Ivalo and his own weariness aside, and drew forth his sword, Rohkea, which was Courage. Amid the living darkness, the blade shone like a star. "More torches, quickly! If the light fails, we are doomed."

Vainamoinen had time to see Ivalo withdraw a torch, and then the battle was joined.

At once, Vainamoinen watched two shadows converge on one of the torchbearers ahead of them. Frantically, the man—Vainamoinen never learned his name—sought to fend them off with sword and fire. Again and again the screaming man's sword rose and fell, but the shadows would not stop.

Then a shadow loomed before Vainamoinen, and thoughts shifted to his own survival. The apparition moaned like a winter wind as it rose from the stone of the floor and stretched ghostly fingers toward his heart.

Rohkea glowed like a dozen torches and Vainamoinen cut it down.

"No," he said. Desperate, the wizard fought to reach the man with the torch, but other men, screaming and fighting and dying, barred his path. Vainamoinen was forced to watch as one of the shadows passed a midnight hand through the man's heart. Even over the cries of battle, Vainamoinen heard him die. Then Vainamoinen watched as the second shadow engulfed the light of the torch and died, giving its existence in the name of darkness.

Frantically, with exigent need, Vainamoinen sought the other torchbearers, his gaze darting along the passage. With Ivalo beside him there were four others, scattered along the length of the narrow tunnel.

Too far.

They were too far away.

He could never reach them.

Another shadow, from the floor, rose before him. Teeth clenched, Vainamoinen drove Rohkea through its black heart.

Behind him, another man screamed and died. And another.

All around him, on all sides, everywhere he looked, his men died. Vainamoinen needed to sing, needed a song to drive away the darkness and save them all. But the shadows and his own weariness would not allow it. So he drove forward with Rohkea, hacking and rending and destroying darkness where his blade touched. The battle seemed to take place as a series of tableaus. Darkness. Light. Darkness. Light. Movement became discrete, the desperation and terror so keenly etched in light was swallowed by darkness. Beside Vainamoinen, Ivalo's breath was a bellows.

"My fault," Ivalo said, over and over again, "my fault. My fault. All my fault. I will make it

right."

Vainamoinen turned. "No."

A shadow rose between them. Then another, and another, as the darkness sought to separate the wizard from the torch.

"Ivalo! No!"

Through the spaces between the hungry darkness, Vainamoinen watched Ivalo pull the oil from his pouch. The forlorn warrior doused himself with the pungent liquid as the shadows closed in around him.

"No!" Vainamoinen cried. In his hands, Rohkea rose and fell, rose and fell.

Not quick enough.

"Follow me!" Ivalo roared. His words echoed down the passage and outward, into the endless night. "Follow me!"

Then Ivalo Korhonen made answer to Fate in a show of courage that resounded forever after in the hearts and souls of the men of Finland.

"Mother," Vainamoinen said, Rohkea a slashing, cleaving shaft of sunlight. "No. Not like this. Oh, Mother, not like this."

Then, surrounded by darkness, a smile stretched wide across his bearded face, Ivalo lowered his torch. The hungry flames touched the large man's oil-sodden hair and ignited in a conflagration that chased the darkness away.

Ivalo screamed. The sound split the passage like a sword stroke. Then he ran. In an urgent, blindingly courageous attempt to make right his mistake, Ivalo Korhonen ran, flaming and screaming and dying, down the passageway. And the shadows melted at his touch.

"Quickly," Vainamoinen said, "go! He has bought us a chance. Stay behind him. Go!" And so, with Ivalo leading the way, and Vainamoinen and the torchbearers at their backs, the remaining warriors of Finland followed the passageway out into the night.

Where death waited for them all.

* * *

No one was ever able to say with certainty whether it was the flames or the arrow that finally ended the cursed life of Ivalo Korhonen, as he stepped out of the cavern and into the eternal night of the North. What is known, is that after leading his brothers and his friends to freedom, as he caught his final glimpse of the perpetual grayness that was the sky in the Northland, Ivalo's screaming stopped, and his courageous spirit found the peace that was forever denied him in life.

"Down!" Illmarinen cried from the edge of the tunnel. "Down!"

Illmarinen watched the...thing that fired the arrow from behind a boulder die on the end of Tarves' reddened blade.

"They are everywhere!" Tarves cried. "Hurry! We cannot hold for long!"

"Go," Illmarinen said, ushering the men from the passage. "Go. Go!"

As the warriors of Finland issued forth from the tunnel, the monsters came for them.

Scorpions. Spiders. Half-man things that were both. Things that were worse than all these things. They were a plague, a vile, black tide that surged from the sides of the mountain and the forest.

"Lords of Flame," Illmarinen whispered. In his heart, despair raised its clawed hand, choked his courage, his spirit.

They would never leave this mountain.

Despite the courage of the men, despite Ivalo's sacrifice and Tarves' holding in the face of . . . this. Despite it all, they would never reach the Sea, never again see their homes, their loved ones. Illmarinen withdrew his hammers. Tears of rage and wrath scorched his cheeks. If he was to die, it would not be in this tunnel. The mighty smith rose. On the plateau before him, his men fought and killed and died. It was time for him to do the same.

"Hold, my friend," Vainamoinen said. Illmarinen did not think he had ever heard the wizard sound so weary. The smith turned. Rohkea was sheathed, and Vainamoinen stooped low, as though broken.

"The Sampo," Vainamoinen whispered, "give me the Sampo, Illmarinen. It is the only chance we have." Vainamoinen's eyes sought Illmarinen's, found and held them with an intensity that burned. "It is the only chance they have."

Illmarinen dropped his eyes. He reached beneath his cloak and drew forth his pouch. "It may destroy us all," Illmarinen said.

"Yes, it may. But the darkness is too deep. And I'll not let those who followed me die. Give it to me, Illmarinen. Give me the Sampo and run. We have no choice."

Illmarinen stood and Vainamoinen rose beside him. The huge smith turned once more to watch the terrible battle that raged on the icy plain before them.

Their men were dying. Vainamoinen was right. Courage was not enough. Faith and a righteous, noble cause were not enough. They would all die here, at the end of the world, swallowed by darkness.

Illmarinen reached into the pouch beneath his cloak.

The screams of men shredded the night. Illmarinen thought of Ivalo. Sacrifice, courage, these things must be allowed to matter. Nothing less was acceptable.

Then Illmarinen pulled the Sampo free of the pouch, and before he passed it to the wizard, opened the lid.

* * *

He should have seen it coming, should have known Illmarinen would have tried to protect him.

Too late. The look in Illmarinen's eyes, he had recognized it too late.

Vainamoinen watched as Illmarinen turned the Sampo away from them and threw back the glittering, jeweled lid, in an effort to unleash the greatest power in the universe.

Nothing happened.

Illmarinen looked at Vainamoinen. Neither man spoke. A short distance away, Tarves gathered the surviving men together into a loose circle. The monsters began to close in around them.

"I don't understand," Illmarinen said. "What—"

Then the Sampo began to glow.

"Gods," Illmarinen whispered.

Vainamoinen scarcely heard. For along with the growing, burgeoning light, there was music. A soft song, unlike any Vainamoinen had ever heard. It was a perfect song, something forever longed for, and the sound of it brought tears to Vainamoinen's ancient eyes.

"It...is wonderful," Vainamoinen whispered.

Outside, the battle came to a halt as all eyes turned to the tunnel, and the light.

"It is time," Illmarinen said. And holding the Sampo out in front of him, Illmarinen stepped out of the cave. Vainamoinen followed.

Every eye on the plateau was fixed on them. Vainamoinen could feel the aggregate hatred like a weight on his soul. Everywhere he looked, gleaming eyes of jet returned his gaze. But no creature of the dark dared approach them.

"The light," Illmarinen said to the men, "it is a haven. Come closer, everyone. The Sampo will protect you."

Vainamoinen stepped from behind his brother and into the light. The wizard gasped. Though still weary beyond words, Vainamoinen felt his mounting fear and doubt vanish beneath that light. And he could tell by the faces of the warriors that his was not the only fear to vanish. Vainamoinen turned to Illmarinen. It was then that he saw the Sampo's price for sanctuary.

"Illmarinen," Vainamoinen gasped. "Your hands."

Where only moments before Illmarinen's hands had been large and strong, now they were desiccated, withered beyond emaciation. As Vainamoinen watched, the disease continued to spread, climbing Illmarinen's thick forearms like leprosy.

Illmarinen smiled at him. "Miracles are never free," the smith said. "We don't have long. We'd better get moving."

When all the remaining men, thirty-two in all, were housed within the confines of the Sampo's saving light, they began their trek back down the mountain.

The monsters followed them, always at the fringe, always looking for one to stumble and fall, to step, for only a moment, out of the light.

As they continued on, many of the men walked backwards through the deep snow, swords high in answer to the threat of the dark. A keen wind whistled and moaned as they descended the angry slope of Mount Ilma. But it did not reach them, not within the light.

But the price for the light was steep, and grew steeper with each downward step that led them to the Sea.

"You'll not make it," Vainamoinen said.

In Illmarinen's withered hands, the Sampo trembled. The desiccation reached his shoulders, caused them to jut at odd angles out of the heavy cloak that hid them.

"I'll make it," the smith said through clenched teeth. "By all the gods, I swear I will make it."

"Not without help," Vainamoinen said. And, despite his weariness, the wizard laid his hands atop his friend's and began to sing.

The song was a sharing, a merging of hope and strength and all that is bright. Vainamoinen could feel the overwhelming, awe-inspiring might of the Sampo. It was a relentless, surging tide that battered his brother's body and spirit. That battered them both, now.

Vainamoinen groaned under the pressure, as he fought with all his heart to stem that rising, desiccating tide.

"Thank you," Illmarinen whispered.

Vainamoinen could not speak. To give answer to what was in Illmarinen's voice would have been too much. So he quietly offered his strength as a gift to Illmarinen, to all of them.

And together, Illmarinen and Vainamoinen, one the son of a goddess, the other just a man, kept that light burning and held the teeming, hungry darkness at bay.

* * *

"The Sea!" Tarves cried.

Vainamoinen almost wept at the words. Though he fought the Sampo with every ounce of his unmatched will, though he gave and gave of his strength and spirit until he was little more than a shallow husk, still it was not enough. Illmarinen was little more than a corpse. His once bright eyes were hollowed pits, and the bones of his cheeks stretched taut the skin that shrunk around them. A man stood on either side of the dying smith to keep him standing, to guide his steps. Illmarinen had not spoken in a long while, and his breath came in short, wheezing bursts. Vainamoinen wondered if Illmarinen could still see.

"Hold on," the wizard said, still clutching his spirit brother's hands. "Just a little longer. You have been so strong, just a little longer."

Beyond the circle of light the monsters waited. So many. They were countless in their number. They were the stars, the grains of sand on the beach. They were every evil thought by every person who had ever lived. And they waited for the light to fail. Vainamoinen had grown accustomed to their snarling advances, to their taunts and curses. And their promises. So many promises. For a time, the darkness had rained arrows down on them. But the Sampo was not so easily defeated. Each arrow that struck the aura of light was burned to ash. The Sampo's price was steep, but its protection was absolute. Vainamoinen knew there could be so much more, that this display of power was nothing, was less than nothing, against what could be achieved with time and understanding. The Sampo was growing still, was coming into its power. Given time, and a will powerful enough to govern it, Vainamoinen wondered if there was anything the Sampo would be unable to achieve. The thought frightened him more than any monster or darkness.

And so it came to pass that the sons of Finland, with the hordes of darkness all around them, made their way out of the mountains, along the black iron walls of Pohjola, and down to the bay.

When they reached the water's edge, a voice from the dark cried, "Now where, wizard? Shall you sing a bridge across to Kaleva? Shall you carry your desiccated brother and your loyal men home on the wings of a song? Where now, ancient one?"

Under his breath, Vainamoinen gave answer. As their vessels appeared from behind their cloaks of magic, Vainamoinen heard the cries and curses of the creatures of the night.

"We will need only one," Tarves said to Vainamoinen.

The wizard nodded.

"Forsell, your torch." In silent appreciation for his competence, Vainamoinen watched Tarves toss the burning brand into the second boat. For several moments, over the hissed curses of the monsters that filled the shore, Vainamoinen and his men watched the vessel burn.

Then slowly, sheltered still by the Sampo's golden grace, the remaining warriors climbed aboard the last of the longships, hefted their oars, and pushed free of the shore.

When they were safely off, and out of the reach of even the longest bows, Vainamoinen stared into the eyes of his failing friend. "You did it," he whispered. Removing his hands from Illmarinen's, Vainamoinen closed the lid.

Darkness engulfed the streaming vessel and Illmarinen, like a dying flower, withered to the deck. The two men beside the smith lowered him gently, with the greatest care. There was respect etched in their collective gazes, respect and something more. For what Illmarinen had done, for the burden the burly smith had shouldered to buy them this chance at freedom, these men would die for him. The realization brought strength to Vainamoinen's exhausted bones.

Carefully, Vainamoinen returned the Sampo to the pouch at Illmarinen's waist. The smith had earned the right to bear the treasure home. The wizard looked to the two men who knelt

beside the fallen smith. “Care for him,” Vainamoinen said.

The men nodded. Vainamoinen stumbled to the rear of the vessel.

Because it was not done. Not yet.

Over the heaving groans of the exhausted sailors, over the frothy rush of the churning waves, Vainamoinen listened for the sound he knew must come.

The sound came sooner than Vainamoinen suspected: oars. Hundreds of them. And the guttural chants of the creatures of Pohjola. Vainamoinen shook his head. Thirty-two sailors. They were not enough. If the vessel was smaller and the men were not exhausted, they would not be enough. Not against what followed them. They had to pass beyond the bay. The barrier of rocks would prevent the largest of Louhi’s vessels from passing into the Sea. If they could reach the Sea, they had a real chance to make it home.

When the wind began to howl and the waves began to grow, Vainamoinen knew that Louhi, too, knew this was so.

To their credit, not a single man aboard the rocking vessel spoke. Each of the thirty-two sailors continued to pull, as though muscle and sinew and courage would be enough to win them the day.

Around them the wind was rabid, and the icy waters of the bay became a seething maelstrom that threatened to overturn the longship. Vainamoinen squinted through the foamy spray. Behind them, the water was a sheet of black glass, and the longships of Pohjola continued to draw closer.

Then a sound like the breaking of the world shook the vessel. “Hard to port!” Tarves cried. As the vessel wheeled, Vainamoinen was tossed to the deck. From his hands and knees he saw the shadow of dripping, summoned rock that towered above them. Men screamed as the sides of the longship ran against the stone, snapping oars into splinters.

As Vainamoinen fought to his feet, a second tower of stone erupted from the bottom of the bay like a thrust spear.

“Starboard!” Tarves roared. “Pull, men! Pull for your lives!”

They did. Again it was not enough. More screams, more shattered oars.

“Enough, Louhi,” Vainamoinen whispered. “Enough.” Then the wizard drew forth his kantele and began to sing.

“O hidden Moon, I pray thee, guide us,
Guide us, thou, O Sun so far away,
Guide us, thou, O Bear of heaven,
From this dark and dismal place,
From these unbefitting waters,
From this heart of frozen evil,
Hence to wander once again the sea,
Hence to walk upon the islands,
On the dry lands of home to walk,
In open air and freedom,
Thus to see the moon at evening,
Thus to see the silver sunlight,
Thus to see the Bear in heaven,
From our homes and hearths.”

At the wizard's words, the seething water calmed and the mountains of rock fell back into the depths.

Vainamoinen continued to sing. He sang as lightning and fire rained down around the vessel like spears from heaven. He sang as mist and clouds descended on them and sought to blind them, only to be driven away, cast aside and rent by the brightness of his song. Vainamoinen's song wove hope into the bleak fabric of that long night, hope that filled the minds and hearts of the besieged sailors who had dared his quest, who had braved this darkest night in an effort to help him make amends for his terrible pride.

Over his song he heard Tarves cry, "The rocks! They are there! The Sea lies just ahead. Pull my friends, pull for your homes! Pull for your families! Pull, sons of Finland, as only heroes can!"

Impossibly, Vainamoinen felt the longship surge ahead as though pushed by some unseen wind. As it did, Vainamoinen raised his voice to match it. He cast his words out into the unending night like a challenge, like a gauntlet dropped before the heart of darkness.

His challenge was answered.

The creature came from the palace, from Kuura. It could mean only one thing.

Vainamoinen ended his song. "Tarves," the wizard said as he withdrew his sword. "Louhi comes."

Tarves' back was to him, but he saw the brave captain flinch.

"I shall hold her off as best I can. Get us through the rocks, Tarves. Do not stop pulling. No matter what."

Then Vainamoinen turned, sword raised and flaming like the buried sun, to face Louhi, Queen of Pohjola, and Sorceress of the North.

She was an abomination. Louhi descended from the sky on the sable wings of a giant eagle. Claws like scythes, feathers like daggers, the beast had a breast of purest, glinting scarlet. And its toothless, ancient head was Louhi's.

"Give me the Sampo, wizard," the Hag of the North screeched, the wind from her wings buffeting the longship and stirring the waves. "It is mine, fairly won, or do you forget your debts?"

Vainamoinen raised his voice. "I forget nothing, Witch of Kuura. The debt was paid, the Sampo was yours. What fault is it of mine if you are unable to hold your treasures?"

Louhi lanced down from the sky like an arrow. Vainamoinen lashed out with Rohkea, then dove to the deck.

Two screams ripped the night. He saw blood coloring his blade and turned.

The headless body of a sailor still clung to his oar. A moment later, Vainamoinen watched it crumple to the deck. Above the longship, hovering like a ghost, Louhi screeched her rage. Blood flowed freely from a deep wound in her side. "What price the Sampo's worth, noble singer?" she asked. "Shall you pay for it with the life of each of your men?"

Louhi dived again.

Under his breath, Vainamoinen sang.

A huge gust of wind exploded across the deck and drove Louhi up.

"Clever, Vainamoinen. But I wonder, how long can you last?"

Louhi dove again. A second gust of wind blunted her attack. With a groan, Vainamoinen staggered under the onslaught and fell to the deck.

Amid the clouds and mist of the perpetual night, Louhi laughed. Then once again, she dove.

Sweat glistened on the wizard's face as he ground out the words to his song. One more time, a gust of wind surged across the deck.

But it was not as strong as it had been.

It was not as strong as it had to be.

Before she was forced to the air, another sailor fell, headless to the deck. Beneath his feet, Vainamoinen could feel the longship begin to slow, could hear the frightened cries of the sailors. Behind them, the forces of Pohjola pulled with all the hatred in their hearts.

A new song then, a desperate song, and a pillar of ice lanced upward from the depths of the bay.

But Louhi was too quick. Laughing, she plunged through the column with her razor wings and smashed it into shards that rained down on the vessel like pieces of glass.

"You are tired and slow, old man," Louhi taunted. As she spoke, arrows bounced off her red breast.

"Row!" Vainamoinen staggered across the planking and screamed at the men who held the bows. "She is beyond you. Row! It is all you can do!"

Above them, Louhi drew a breath.

"No." Vainamoinen rushed to the front of the vessel, Rohkea held aloft.

Then the dark Sorceress of the North rained fire down on them, a holocaust that boiled the water around the struggling vessel. That would have devoured the longship in an instant, had Vainamoinen not been there to meet it.

Sword upraised, Vainamoinen fought the firestorm with all the strength of his hero's heart.

He was driven to his knees as fire flowed around him, around the vessel, where it was lost in the bubbling water of the bay.

But Louhi would not stop. Vainamoinen was battered by the inferno, driven down and down by the inexorable heat and pressure. Beside him, flames licked at the sides of the hull. Men set aside their oars and began to draw water to stop the fire from spreading. Smoke stung his eyes, and clogged his throat.

And still Louhi would not stop.

Vainamoinen sang. With all his heart and courage, he sang.

It was not enough. He knew it was not enough. So much effort, so much sacrifice. How unfair to fail now, with freedom so close.

Flame began to play along his blade and as hard as he sang, he could not put it out. The ship was afire now, the vessel coasting on as the sailors worked to prevent the fire from consuming the longship.

Effort. Sacrifice. In the face of so much evil, it was not enough. In the end, his pride would cost them all. Pride had led to the Sampo. Pride had led him to return. Ivalo had been wrong when he had shouldered the blame. The blame, of course, had never been Ivalo's. It had been his. Always his.

Vainamoinen spared a glance for Tarves. He led the men in fighting the fires, he barked orders and carried water. Beside him, men launched arrow after arrow at winged Louhi. She seemed not to notice. But they did not stop trying. Vainamoinen was proud of these men, these sons of Kaleva in Finland, who had trusted him and followed him. Just beyond them, very close now, the ships of Pohjola continued their unrelenting advance.

They, all of them, working together, had been so close, so near to achieving the impossible. Grief and sorrow threatened to choke the life from him. But he would not bow to despair. For

these men, for their courage and their faith, he would fight. And he would die.

This last song would break him, would burst his heart and end his days. But, if the gods were kind, perhaps it might buy Tarves time to escape. Perhaps.

With what was very nearly the last of his strength, Vainamoinen stood. Inch by terrible, agonizing inch, the wizard thrust back the fire of Louhi. He saw her eyes widen. But the onslaught did not stop. Would not stop, until he was dead.

Or they both were. Vainamoinen closed his eyes and Rohkea began to glow.

It was time for an ending.

His song started out slow, a droning like the beating of a thousand hearts. Rohkea throbbed with the words. The noise and the cries of the men around him grew distant in his mind.

Because his eyes were closed, because his mind was focused on an ending that might have meaning, Vainamoinen did not see the miracle.

"Let me help."

The words smashed Vainamoinen's focus, sent his mind reeling. Even as the heat and pressure vanished, the wizard turned.

Withered, quivering with supreme effort, Illmarinen stood before him. In his trembling hands he held the Sampo. The lid was open, and a shaft of golden light drove the flames back. Struggling to understand, Vainamoinen heard Louhi scream, turned to see her own flames engulf her, and send her burning and spiraling into the icy waters.

Things were happening too quickly. Behind him, he heard Illmarinen fall. Vainamoinen turned again, and suddenly, he too, was falling. Around them, men rushed with water to put out the flames that threatened to devour the ship.

Illmarinen, his face a sunken wreck, smiled at him.

Vainamoinen had no words. The Sampo lay upon the deck, the lid fallen closed.

"To the oars," Tarves cried. "To the oars or we smash on the rocks!"

Underneath his prone body, Vainamoinen felt the battered ship come to life. Over the sides of the deck, he could see the rocky entrance to the bay just ahead. Behind them, the forces of Pohjola had come to rest.

Safe. They would be safe after all. The thought would not stay in his mind; it slipped away from him and refused to take hold.

Illmarinen whispered. "I told you I'd hold."

Then, at his oldest friend's words, the thought did take hold. With men like this who believed in him, like Ivalo, and Tarves, how could they not have succeeded in the end?

Vainamoinen made ready to answer when Louhi burst from the water like a smoldering bolt of lightning and grabbed the Sampo in her blackened claw.

He heard Illmarinen's strangled, gurgling cry. "No!"

He heard Louhi's voice, triumphant. "Yes! It is mine! It shall always be –"

Vainamoinen threw Rohkea with all the strength of his shattered heart. Rohkea, its blade a radiant, living blaze, slashed through the ever-night of the North like final judgment.

It struck the Sampo and smashed it, casting the broken pieces into the frigid waters of the bay, where, after a time, they were carried outward, to the Sea. Smoldering, a burned and scarred thing, Louhi screamed her inarticulate wrath and returned to her palace.

Vainamoinen had collapsed to the deck, his hatred and his strength utterly spent. Beside him, Illmarinen's blood was a spreading pool.

It had happened so fast.

"We are through," Tarves said. "Gods of the Sea, we are through."

Vainamoinen crawled over beside his fallen brother. He cradled Illmarinen in his arms and wept. For courage, and pride, for sacrifice and heroes, Vainamoinen wept for a long time.

The End

Scott Clements resides in Windsor, ON Canada. He currently works as an elementary school teacher while attempting to complete his novel SAEMUND. His previous novel, a children's fantasy entitled THE THERMOPYLUNG, is in the hands of super-agent Robert Stephenson who is currently searching out a home for it. He's had a number of short stories published on the web, all in for-the-love emags, and is still trying to land that first pro sale.

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"Trapping," Veron corrected him. "Been lean. Down to my last pennion. Truth be told, I en't had a decent meal in weeks. When I saw your chimney lit, I thought I might stop in. I've got a cold leg of doe might go a treat with cottager's stew, if'n you've got the wherewithal for the rest."

Veron Harriday grinned. He was missing several teeth, and his eyes were slightly sunken. But there was a spark in them, the slight gleam of a hungry man. His clothing was dirty and tattered. There was a large hunting knife strapped to his belt, and another shoved down in his left boot.

"Where did you say you hale from?" Evam asked.

"Never did have a town to call my own," the trapper replied.

"Your family must miss you terribly during the trapping months," Neffie said, struggling out of her chair. The suckling cat jumped down, then jumped back up to take advantage of the swift-escaping heat she left behind.

"Never had one of those neither."

"Oh?" she said. "No one to wonder where you are at all? Now that's a tragedy." She smiled. "I imagine we could put together a good stew. My Evam's stored enough vegetables to get us through two winters. He's a wonderful farmer."

"Though we've run out of meat," Evam said.

"Seems to me you do all right," Veron said, glancing around. The cottage, though small, was well-made. There was real cushioned furniture, the kind that wasn't made by farmer's hands, and thick rugs only slightly soiled by the chickens. From a back room he heard a heavy sigh.

"That's the cow," Neffie said. "We've had to get used to the smell. And we do just fine. Evam has a stall in the summer market at Manking. We're saving up for the baby." She rubbed her hand across her belly.

"Neffie," said Evam. "The man doesn't need to know everything about us."

"That's right," said Veron, catching his cue. He went through his pack and brought out a small chunk of something wrapped in dirty cloth. Neffie took it, and bustled off into the kitchen nook.

"Need some help?" Evam asked.

"No, no," Neffie called back. "You two men just sit and get acquainted."

Evam and Veron looked at one another. Veron fussed with his knife-belt a bit, settling it on his hip, then glanced around again.

"Farming seems to provide for you," he said.

"I do well enough," Evam replied.

"Well enough you haven't eaten the cow yet."

For the first time, Evam smiled. "Oh, no. We'd never eat the cow. Besides, Neffie and I have always been lucky. Something always comes along, in the end."

Veron went over to warm his hands by the fire, scrutinizing the stone for loose chinks behind which money might be stored. Evam came up behind him.

"Wish I could say the same for the trapping. This long winter's got the animals lean, and from what I've seen they got a bit of mange in them."

"Lucky you found us then."

Veron looked up at the mantle. Among the various knick-knacks of the farmer's trade—an old harness half-repaired, some fishing line—there was a golden figurine.

It was an odd little thing; a figure squatting on skeletal limbs, the starved tendons and

spurs of bone poking out from its joints meticulously carved. But what was more disturbing was the figure's face. It was both long and wide, the chin reaching down like an old man's beard to the belly, the skin of the cheeks stretched out on the poles of an impossible jaw that poked out beyond its shoulder blades. The teeth were thick platters of ivory, wide and smooth and square. The tongue sat fat between them, a golden slug. He shivered. It seemed vaguely familiar.

"That'd about give a man a turn coming around the bend," he said, calculating the figure's possible weight and looking for scuff marks to indicate it wasn't real gold. He could see none.

"Isn't it just the funniest little thing?" Neffie said, coming from the kitchen nook where the smells of cooking followed her. "It's an old family heirloom. You know him, of course."

Veron shook his head.

She laughed. "Why, it's Parslaver Jack. Carbuncle Cornwall."

Veron looked at her, puzzled.

"Old Rhieguld himself!" she said.

That gave Veron a real start. Deep in the murk of his memory were the buried remnants of childhood. This childhood and its various tragedies had set him on the road he walked now, earning his living in ways that had never included trapping. It was a life he learned from his mother, who had kept him in line by the most horrible threats, the most frightening tales of Rhieguld—she had called him Red Tom Brown—and the mad god's hunger for children's flesh.

"It had to have been he that spawned ye," she'd say, leaning close so that he could smell her rotting tooth, "so it'll be he that comes to get ye! And he'll gnaw on your bones, my boy, oh, how Rhieguld loves a nice bone, and maybe he'll share ye out with his minions, and maybe he'll keep you all to himself."

Then she would work her lips over her worn teeth, and make smacking sounds that terrified him.

"Rhieguld," he said nervously. "Doesn't exist. The gods locked him up behind the Knot of Shunt." This was what he had learned later, what he whispered to himself when awakened from nightmares of his mother's face that turned into another face—*that* face, he realized as he looked at the figurine again. It had been *that* face, but it had had flesh on it.

"Locked him up, yes, but that doesn't mean he doesn't exist," Neffie said. "I imagine he's still around, and one or two of his minions as well, the old darklings, the eaters, the sucklings."

She let her eyes stray over the figurine's form. "Good old Rhieguld. My, how that god could tell a joke. And you might be strung up, flayed for the stew, but you'd *have* to laugh, because he had that way about him. Ooh." She put her hand suddenly over her belly. "That's the baby kicking."

Her husband went immediately to her side, and she guided his hand to a spot below her ribs.

Evam laughed. "Feels like he's got hoofs!"

Veron stood, frozen, the snow in his beard melted by the fire and trickling down through his shirt in chilly threads.

"But doesn't he give me the oddest cravings," Neffie said. "I never would have imagined."

"Cravings," said Veron.

"Things I never would have thought to eat before. Like jam. I never was fond of jam as a child. Too sticky. And apples."

Evam laughed. "Why, when I met her, you couldn't force an apple down her for love nor money."

"Is that the stew boiling?" Neffie said. She hurried off to the cooking nook, leaving the two

men alone.

Evam shook his head, chuckling. "The strangest cravings. Before the snows came we were taking down the stall in Manking, and she got her sights set on a bit of dog. Nothing would make her happy but to have some dog."

Veron made a sound in his throat.

"It's a shame you don't have a family," Evam said. "It's a wonderful thing to know you'll be carried on, in some way, by the little things that come out of you."

"I should go." Veron turned to the door, eyeing his coat. "Before more snow falls. I could get trapped in here. I'd hate to put you out like that, having me underfoot for a day or more." He tried to smile. Somehow, it felt like Rhieguld's smile, stretched out beyond its limits into something that was less a smile than a grimace, or a howl.

"A shame," Evam said. "And here we've taken your last bit of meat. Stay for the meal at least."

"No, no." Veron backed away. "Keep it. I only came to see to you."

"Did you?" Evam said, following him slowly.

"That's right. Neighborly concern."

"You know, Veron. I do a bit of hunting, as I said. Strangely enough, I've never seen any traps in that forest."

Veron laid his scarf over his shoulders.

"A man's got to look out for his family," Evam went on. "To make sure they're safe. To make sure they're fed."

Veron whirled, and drew his knife. "I'm leaving," he said. "I won't harm you, but you won't stop me. And I'll say nothing about you, nor your wife, and you needn't worry about seeing me again."

"And the baby," Evam said as if he hadn't heard him, as if he didn't even see the knife. "It's due any day now. What will he eat while he's growing?"

"Let him eat the cow," Veron said.

"*No,*" Evam said, as if scolding a forgetful child. "I *told* you. We'd never eat the cow."

And then Veron realized he had forgotten about Neffie. Something hit him on the back of the head, something hard that went *clunk*. Suddenly his legs wouldn't hold him up, his hand wouldn't hold the knife, and he felt himself falling down, falling forward, until he hit the floor with his face. Something in his nose shattered, and he saw his mother's grin turn into Rhieguld's face before it dragged him down into the deepest black.

"Ooh," Neffie said, dropping the iron skillet and putting her hand to her belly. "Now he's just gone wild."

Evam beamed. "That's my boy."

With a little grunt, the suckling cat jumped down from the chair, and went to work on one of Veron's fingers.

The End

M. Thomas is a short story editor for Deep Magic. This story is set in the same world as her novel Found Things*, and builds upon the legends that formulate the rest of the series. About the story she says, "I chose Neffie's second line of dialogue very carefully. When read correctly, or even after the fact, it tells the reader exactly what's going to happen."*

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I couldn't join the funeral procession that came stumbling through the streets at twilight. Their moans and groans were unearthly and made me tremble in fear. I looked out the window just as the little coffin was being carried past. It was, like my sister's, empty. I couldn't bear the suffering gloom of the village. Fleeing by my cottage's back door, I slipped into the cool night. It was the autumn equinox, a fine crystal night, with stars appearing in the darkening twilight. I took a shuddering breath and started through the streets, away from the funeral procession and the graveyard.

I couldn't help wondering about the castle. Death hung around it like a curse. And yet people were inexplicably drawn to it. I had only seen it up close once. It had held no charm for me then, and I still saw no reason for anyone to desire entrance to it.

I could hear the funeral dirges the villagers were singing. I hurried away quickly, my eyes on the ground. The wailing and crying reminded me too much of my sister's funeral, the pain and horror and shuddering fear I felt in the months that followed. It was the fear I struggled with most. As the pain faded to a dull, ever-present soreness, and the horror ebbed away into an echo, the fear only seemed to grow. I had nightmares of the castle. I saw my sister running up the steps, heard the sound of her shrieking added to that of the ghosts. I saw her face, pale and pearly, looming before me, her arms outstretched. I always awoke in a cold sweat. I could only think of the maliciousness of the ghosts and the fear of what they did to her--and what they could do to me.

My fear grew into an obsession. I would sit by the grandmothers of the village and listen to them spin their tales about the castle. They told some horrific ones. The ghosts were always evil and vengeful, never kind; rarely did the tragic hero of the story escape their deathly clutches. My mother didn't tell stories about the castle anymore, not even to my little brother. He knew not to venture to the castle.

I knew too, but in my mindless wandering of the village my feet had taken me to the very place. I stopped in my tracks, a coldness starting at my feet and climbing up my body to entwine itself around my heart. The castle was a shadowing hulk against the night sky. It was a crumbling building, ivy clinging to the bases of the towers and making its slow way up to the ramparts. A short stone wall ran around the castle, containing a small lawn with ancient, crooked trees and a scattering of straggly bushes. It was silent and dark.

I trembled as I took one step forward, then another. I pushed myself up and over the stone wall, treading carefully on the wilting grass. Nothing was in sight. I dashed to a bush and flung myself behind it, peering out through its branches. Still I saw nothing but the yawning opening that led inside the castle. I closed my eyes and heaved a breath. Perhaps it was all lies and superstition. Perhaps those people that disappeared into the castle did not fall victim to ghosts, but instead had tripped down some stairs, or perhaps they were hit on the head by a piece of falling stone. That was a more reasonable, logical explanation. But I could not shake the feeling of the supernatural that pervaded the grounds of the castle, so I decided to leave.

A soft peal of laughter broke through the night.

My eyes flew open, and I stared through the thin branches of the shrub. There were shapes moving around the gardens, more than two dozen it seemed, and the soft rumble of conversation drifted on the breeze. My chest constricted painfully. The shapes seemed to grow more distinct. Some seemed to be getting closer. My head spun, and I dared not leave my hiding spot. The dark shapes were just a few feet away.

I had always imagined the ghosts as pearly and translucent, but these were nothing of the sort. They were black, a hideous darkness that seemed to project its own sort of illumination.

Sometimes I could see their features clearly. Other times the images blurred and smudged, only to resolve back into focus a few minutes later. They were talking to one another, laughing hysterically, and gesturing wildly. I was horrified, transfixed.

It was the equinox. The ghosts roamed the gardens at the equinox.

A small black smudge came hurtling toward the group of spirits near my bush. I bit back a gasp as the specter's image sharpened. It was the little boy that had disappeared just days ago. He was as black as the rest of the ghosts, and his face was fixed with a devilish grin. I blinked back tears.

I leaned away from the bush, intent on fleeing before any of the nearby specters could discover me, when another figure floated over. It burst out into wild, familiar laughter. This time I could not contain my gasp. I leapt from my hiding spot, crying aloud.

My sister's possessed eyes widened, and then she flew at me, her arms outstretched.

The End

Amy R. Butler is currently a student in northern New Jersey. "Autumn Equinox" is her first acceptance into an e-zine, but she refuses to believe it's her last. She will freely admit she's fascinated by Ireland, castles, foreign accents, and, of course, knights in shining armor.

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It is wise to know the enemy and the ways of your adversary. It is unwise to know him better than you know yourself, better than you know the Prince of Peace. Thibaud gained too much knowledge about the gospel's foe. The Serpent, ever watchful of a way to desecrate what is holy, saw well the unchecked sin in Thibaud's heart. Desire, particularly that wanting which drives men to covet what is not theirs, is a ready tool of the enemy. The brother of Or that we once welcomed with opened arms and hands of friendship is no longer spoken of, save in hushed tones. For his part in this tragedy of souls, Thibaud is dead. Perhaps he made his confession before passing, and in that, God, benefactor of grace beyond measure, forgave his iniquities. We will never know in this life for his confessor, Brother Armand, has gone to the reward of heaven, requiescat in pace. Their deaths are but a few fruits of Thibaud's wickedness. For now a venom has been loosed in this place. It binds itself to the very brick and mortar of these walls, the timbers overhead. It insinuates a vile presence in all things it touches. The heart of a man need only open itself to a moment's impious thought and all is lost. The iniquity of the Ornaun has poisoned this land, the depths of its soil producing the fruits of the Abyss, the noxious fumes of Hades rising up to disgust the godly man.

Thibaud sold himself to the dark prince, and in that bargain he has given Satan a purchase with which the Devil may gain a place on this sacred soil. That which was once consecrated for the furtherance of the Kingdom is now under the assault of its greatest foe. We, the handful that remain of our brethren, are determined to defeat him, or give ourselves as sacrifices to the greater battle of time. Though time we have not.

Wickedness batters us from within as the enemy uses our own minds and hearts as his weapons. The very bodies we have sanctified as temples for the ministry of the gospel are now swords against one another by the will of the adversary. It is as though Thibaud has opened the gates of perdition beneath this very land and given the angels of Satan an entry to our fair bastion of righteousness. This is no longer a temple of service to the Almighty, though we would give our lives to hold it. There is nothing that can be done to save any of the Brethren of Maudire. I would that God send fire to this place as He did Sodom and Gomorrah. If He does not we will, for that is the will of our Abbot.

Already the air is tinged with the vile odor of Thibaud's folly. The stench is great now in my nostrils. I feel the fear that feeds this malevolence rising up within the marrow of my bones, gnawing away at the fibers of my sinews. Try as I may, I cannot bring into captivity that which will be my demise. Though I would repent a thousand times, offering to do the penance of murderers and thieves, I will not escape. Even now, though I would rather crucify myself on this very spot, my mind races to the instrument of my demise. The parchment beneath my fingers is stained with the nervous sweat of anticipation, of sensing the impending diablerie and being powerless before it. It seems that even the walls are permeated, crying baneful tears filled with iniquity. There is nothing left but to cry out to God for His deliverance and mercy. At the very least, we would pray for His acceptance of our souls in death.

Father, for the sake of your children, stave off this – oh no – the floor – it is stained with – Dear God – we are too late.

II

Cimmerian depths covered the hall, illumination coming only from scant rays through

stained glass: yellow fading to orange, fading to red, fading to violet. The rainbow cast a colorful pallor over the wooden fixtures; rich oaks and cedars were bathed in a multi-hued sea. Candles molded purest white were tinted in bright, translucent hues. Books lay open on tables in the crossing, undisturbed by the passage of time. Pages drawn with great care were given over to changing tones as the fading sun highlighted the exquisite details of gilt leaf and fiery red and orange ink. A golden goblet sitting on a stone dais gleamed, radiating a dazzling aurum display. Tiny specks of dust floated in the waning daylight, a slow, misguided ballet of minutia carried on the air. Their dance bore testimony to the stillness of the place, undisturbed and silent.
The greater light of the sky was giving in to the shadows of its lesser brother, overtaken in the passing of time. The thick panes now resisted the last threads of scarlet from the daystar. The chapel fell into slumber.

The shattering of glass broke the silent night, echoing through the stonework of the nave. The sound of bare footfalls smacked against the gray granite floor and into the buttresses overhead. Their reverberation rang against the outer wall, down the epistle side of the nave. Around the corner of the south transept they came to a halt. Outside, the intense gallop of horses stopped suddenly and was followed by the tromp of boots up to the broken window. A disembodied voice drifted in, resounding through the sanctuary, followed by another.

"We know you're in here, boy. Come out and make things easy on yourself."

"The Marquis may be merciful this time. Maybe you will lose only a finger instead of your hand."

Another rider approached, by the sound of it on a larger steed. The newcomer stomped impatiently toward the other men, apparently a man of greater authority.

"Get the boy."

"Come out you little –"

"Idiot!" yelled the officer. "Do you think he has survived as a thief by being a fool? He is not stupid. Go in and get him."

Both men hesitated.

"Mon Capitaine," one of the men whispered. "I would not go in that place for all the gold in the exchequer."

"Nor I," answered the other nervously.

Metal scrapped metal as the officer drew his sword. The hiss of breath escaping in rage preceded the threat.

"You will go in and find the boy," the captain took a step, "or I will run you through."

One soldier stammered, "Better dead than in there."

"Oui, Capitaine," chimed the other. "I would sooner spend a night in the halls of Hades than go inside that cathedral."

There was a moment of indecision when silence among the men prevailed. The night sang with the echo of nocturnal fauna. It was as though the land itself reiterated the soldier's claim, crying out its own refusal of the officer.

"Worthless curs," cursed the officer at his men. Then he turned to the broken glass. "You have to come out sometime, sewer rat."

* * *

Vardon finally breathed again at the diminishing sound of riders fading in the darkness. For a long moment he sat, shaking in the silence. Two days of running barefoot across cold, wet

farmland left him shivering and exhausted. His lower lip quivered with a mixture of fear and frigidity. The rags on his back – a short tunic, rip legged trousers and an undersized leather jerkin – were mired in the filth of Provençal, France. The strands of his brown, wavy hair were caked in mud, clumped in a tangled mess. A pair of long gashes marred his cherubic face with crimson streaks, the result of diving into a thicket of brambles to hide from his pursuers. Only his eyes, a deep emerald, were physically unblemished, though not without scar. Unabashed dread ran as a deep river through his verdant irises, the look of prey waiting to be taken.

This was no simple pheasant for the taking, however. This prey was more like a fox. If thievery was an art, Vardon was on his way to becoming a master craftsman. He had no idea how old he was, but as long as he could remember, Vardon lived by the law of the street. "The fleet of feet get to eat," an older boy had told him once. Possession was ownership. If you had it in your hand, it was yours. Of course there were detractors to this law. They seemed to think you should work for a day's wages, limited as they were. You should respect what other people had secreted away in their homes behind locked doors and shuttered windows. Vardon obeyed the laws of hunger. Get what you could, as much as you could get, and get it anyway you could get it. He became so good at it as to gain a bit of notoriety with the Marquis of Baronne. This explained his mad dash to and subsequent vandalistic break-in at the church.

With the possibility that the Marquis' men were still about, Vardon crept silently to the shattered glass. Carefully placing his steps to avoid jagged shards, the boy raised himself up to see if his attackers still lurked about. A fire danced against the blackness of night, marking the soldier's camp. Vardon considered escaping to the other side of the church, but the thought of another man watching the opposite side occurred to him. For now, he would have to stay here.

Here was a strange place, this cathedral. It was not especially large, but spacious enough to accommodate a large party of parishioners. Formed after the typical fashion of a cross shaped church, it had a discernible narthex, nave, crossing, chancel, and altar, though the absence of illumination made them difficult to see clearly. It was a place of safety, a sanctuary. Vardon heard tales of men who had been accused of crimes running to holy ground and claiming the Right of Sanctuary. Staring at the small leather sack in his hand, Vardon knew he had reason to beg refuge. Not only were there stolen loaves of bread and a flask of the Marquis' wine, but also a small pouch filled with gold coins. Such thievery was punishable by the chopping off of fingers, hands, and in some cases, heads. If he left while the Marquis' men remained, he would find out which.

Vardon looked around at his home for the moment. There was an impenetrable darkness that ruled over the chamber. The sun had fallen into shadow and the moon had not yet risen to take its place. In their absence the night ruled. This was fine with Vardon. Being the thief that he was, the boy preferred to live in shadow, slinking from one dark pool to another in search of whatever precious commodities – food, extra clothing, money – may be found. This was his lot in life, and Vardon took that in stride. If God had chosen to let him be a thief, he would oblige the Almighty with all of his skills. Vardon rose from his hiding place and began to walk about the empty confines of the nave. Despite its dreary, oppressive shadows, the thief began to feel at home.

Then suddenly, each movement that Vardon made was announced, the massive hall echoing the slightest wave of sound. In between footfalls, there was silence, a deep petrifying absence of sonority. It was as though he stood in a tomb, sealed off from the outside world. The soldiers, night birds and insects, all of night seemed to die away from his ears. Overhead, the great chandeliers lethargically came to life. Vardon turned his eyes to the great buttresses that

held the stone ceiling. The intricate masonry held his eyes for a time, alternating between the gray granite and black iron.

When his eyes returned to the stained glass, it was repaired. The shards which he had been carefully avoiding underfoot were no more. The window which he had broken was restored, the panes of scarlet, cerulean, and emerald glass refitted in their part of the greater story about the Life of Christ. Vardon blinked hard, thinking it a dream. Windows did not repair themselves without a glassmaker. Glass did not sweep itself from the floor without a sweeper. Quickly, he looked about, expecting someone or something to be in the house of refuge. Trepid fingers traced the newly renovated panel before the boy backed away. His eyes were still riveted to the window when he caught a movement from the corner of his eye.

It was only a fleeting vision, barely perceptible in his line of sight. It seemed to be traversing along the opposite wall in the direction of the narthex. The blurred image faded nearly as swiftly as it had appeared, but remained visible long enough to be recognized. The brief glimpse showed a man, a fatherly looking figure, wearing black robes over a gray tunic. The face was nondescript, the distance making his visage difficult to distinguish save the thin fringe of black hair. Vardon blinked, and the figure was no more.

Vardon felt uneasy. It was as if a thousand tiny needles had pricked the small of his back, but only enough to make their existence known. The shiver running up his spine gave warning to his mind in a primal way. The animal in Vardon knew better than to remain. The primal urge to flee bore down on his mind with such a weight that it could not be ignored. Yet the curiosity of youth overcame the innate, and he held himself still.

The young thief was rewarded with yet another apparition. A more substantial form arose from behind the high altar. This one had more perceivable features. Short-cropped hair melded into a brown beard equally well trimmed. A crimson colored cassock clothed the man, replete with the vestments of high clerical office. He seemed to be in preparation for something, moving things around on the stone dais, ordering them according a prescribed ritual.

Vardon caught his reverie in time to notice other phantasms joining the congregation. Each was involved in a particular task with a single-minded dedication. They were dressed in various forms and colors of clerical vestment. The attendants straightened chairs in the charnel, wiped clean the dust from windowsills and tables, and laid out a meal on a long wooden table in the crossing. They ranged in age from elderly to just older than Vardon himself. Some younger, some older, but all the participants seemed oblivious to the misplaced youth. He watched in stunned silence as the scene unfolded before his eyes. One moment he had been alone, shivering in a deserted cathedral, the next he was surrounded by an entire assembly. A cold, bone-chilling sensation ran up the length of Vardon's spine. A feeling, something akin to a blast of frigid air, passed through his body, taking his breath. The thief staggered, placing a hand on the wall to catch himself.

Then he nearly fainted.

As the feeling passed, Vardon saw the church through a haze. His vision cleared again to reveal the cause. Before his eyes a specter of a man walked away from where Vardon was standing, the form of which came out of his own body. The black cowled form simply walked through him, going on to whatever timeless duties it performed. The thief nearly buckled at the knees, his breath coming in short gasps. His body fought back the urge to wretch. Vardon felt sick and terrified and confused and –

It was looking at him.

As Vardon reeled in the wake of the spirit's passing, the apparition turned at the end of

the nave as if it had just noticed the boy's presence. Vardon was held by the impassive glare. It was as if the specter saw into and yet through him. Deep cerulean eyes offered a mixture of compassion and distrust, greeting and wariness. Unlike his brethren, this monk wore his hair long, unusual for a man of the strict order. Beneath his black cowl and scapular was a gray tunic bound with a simple cord.

The boy trembled, his hands shaking with violent spasms. Unintelligible muttering fell from his lips, and Vardon rocked back and forth, desperate to make his body move. Legs that were swift with corded, spindly muscles held still, as though rooted to the floor. In his mind he screamed at himself, berated his inability to respond. He had lived on the streets of Paris, for the love of God. Men had been butchered, women brutalized, children – himself included – victimized for the pleasure of wealthy gentry, and all of this before his eyes. He had seen knights battling to the death, their bloody contests bone-chilling in cruelty. And yet, it was to no avail. Vardon could do nothing but stare dumbfounded at the monastic phantom, held beyond his will.

A graceful flick of the wrist and the monk turned his hand over palm up and extended it out to Vardon. The brother pointed into the midst of the crossing with a gesture of welcome and offering. Beyond the spirit lay a banquet table. Vardon's eyes grew wide to see such a feast. Bread, cheese, leeks, apples, asparagus, and flagons of red wine were all piled on platters and arranged neatly. Steam rose from the loaves and cooked vegetables, rising in thin wisps to the timbered ceiling. Unexpectedly, Vardon noticed the scent of food, the aroma permeating his senses – particularly the olfactory. He felt himself drifting, led beyond his own control to the amply prepared table. As Vardon approached the black robed monk, the specter moved aside and opened the way for the young pickpocket. The same unnerving sensation coursed his body in the presence of the specter, though his hunger steeled his nerves enough to continue on. After a dozen or so steps, Vardon stood before the formal meal.

And they dined.

III

The meal was something from a mad jester's imagination. It began simply enough, a silent prayer as heads were bowed and robed figures stood behind their chairs. An unspoken amen ended the entreaty of blessing and signaled the ensuing of lunacy. The previously subdued brothers fell upon the contents of the table, their incorporeal forms flowing into one another as they raked gobs of food into their mouths, gallons of wine following that. The consumed victuals passed through the ghostly forms, landing in splats and sloshes on the once well manicured table and the cold, stone floor. The dishes looked no different save the jumbling of things together. Yet, as they landed, the provisions reeked of a putrid, rotting stench. It was as though the provisions had become tainted by their contact with the beings of a netherworld.

Vardon moved away, his appetite lost. The overwhelming desire to retch took hold, and Vardon turned away to relieve himself. His burden lifted, he turned his attention back to the hosts of this gala. The brethren had quit their meal and now stood facing one another in groups of two and three. Though their eyes were little more than cimmerian specks, Vardon felt the rage emanating from them. A sense of pure malevolence flowed from monk to monk. Vardon stepped backward, his eyes still riveted to two men near and to his right. One, an elder gentleman, was nearly bald, save for a thin fringe that ran from ear to ear. His body was bent at the waist. He

craned his head up like a turtle peering from beneath its shell. The other, a few decades younger, looked to be in the prime of physical life. Even through the robes, Vardon could see the large, muscular frame that held the young man firmly rooted to his spot. Vardon wanted to run. He strained his body to move, desperately tearing at the invisible chains that held him fast. It was to no avail. Vardon was forced to watch as the younger man charged his older counterpart. Similar scenes were taking place all over the great hall. The one in front of the little thief held his attention as the two men clashed together in a jumble of flying cloth. The boy watched in abject horror as the older man was beaten savagely. The larger monk had kicked the elder several times in the ribs, a cracking sound accompanying the final few blows. As the senior man lay gasping, the other took his head and slammed it into the stone floor until the old man lay in a pool of his own blood. Again, Vardon wretched.

When the thief rose from his knees, he found the glazed, maniacal eyes of the middle aged monk staring into his own. The man swung a balled fist at Vardon, narrowly missing. A blast of frigid air came with the passing blow, chilling the boy to the marrow. The fear for his life overcame the paralyzing hold that forced Vardon to witness this menagerie of insanity and he ran. Into the streams of moonlight that arched down from the high stained glass, he went, dodging piles of food and scattered chairs. Through several monks he passed, their icy touch reaching into his heart and taking his breath. Scenes of violent deaths were caught in his peripheral vision, their macabre actions driving him to greater speed. Vardon reached the door to the sacristy and turned to find no pursuer.

What he did find was an empty room. Vardon fell back against the door and slumped to the floor. His heart was still pounding, his head throbbing. His body ached from bruises and bumps unfelt during his escapade. Vardon still doubted what lay before his eyes. The feast, the food, the raging brethren killing one another with frenzied glee, all of it was gone, an unpleasant memory to feed nightmares to come. In his mind the thief could not reconcile the events with reality. Maybe he had been hallucinating. Maybe it was all a dream, a wicked fantasy to be forgotten in the first rays of morning sunlight. Yet in his heart Vardon knew the truth: the truth of icy fingers clutching at his soul, the truth of murderous eyes leering into his mind, the truth of the evil that was the Monastère de Maudire.

IV

Vardon woke to the sound of his own scream. He had managed to find a place on the floor beneath a table and pile several robes there to make a pallet. A jumbled series of horrific images had brought his slumber to an end. The boy sat back to the wall with his knees drawn to his chest. The chill of night crept up his spine and he shivered, a deep spasm that shook his body. He had to leave, had to get out of this place before he went mad. But to where? Outside, the Marquis' men waited, eager to gain a bounty for his hide. Going back into the sanctuary was not an option in his mind, at least not until the morning. So he was trapped, held between the living and the dead. Sleep seemed the most reasonable option. Perhaps the dawn would bring a solution. With that thought in mind, Vardon lay back into the woolen clothing and fell into another uneasy slumber.

The rest lasted less than an hour. Vardon tossed and turned until at last he thrashed hard enough to crack his head against the stone floor. He reached up to find blood matting in his hair,

a crimson smear covering his hand. The taste of bile reached up from his throat and by a sheer act of will was forced back down. Vardon rolled out from under the table and rose to his knees. His heart pounded in his head, much as it would if he were having a hangover. Vardon wobbled from side to side, his balance unsure. A flash of freezing air bore into him and the boy came up quickly, backing against the wall for support. Something in his soul, something innate told him he was not alone. A presence flitted about on the edge of Vardon's periphery, just out of his vision, just in his consciousness. Backing around the room against the wall, the thief made his way toward the door.

Vardon was only a few steps from the door when the monk appeared. Seated at the table where Vardon had slept was a late middle-aged man, garbed in the black vestments of a deacon. The dark cassock looked to be made of silk or some other fine material. The man was bent over the table, writing furiously. Under his breath, the monk was saying something Vardon could not hear. Intermittently, he raised and lowered his head, apparently thinking of his next word or phrase. Everything in Vardon said to run, to flee this place and get as far away as he could. His heart told him that the dungeon beneath the Marquis' castle was a far better place than this. Even though his hand was on the iron ring of the door, the boy felt drawn to the spirit. With a hand still fingering the black metal, he stepped tentatively toward the table.

Cautiously, the thief crept up on the engaged monk. As he approached, Vardon could feel the air grow colder. Each step toward the ghostly visage was a step into a more frigid mass of atmosphere. Condensation floated in front of the boy's advance. Gooseflesh crawled back and forth across his skin, his body shivering with a mixture of discomfort and fear. He was nearly to his quarry when he began to make out bits and pieces of what the monk was saying.

Wickedness batters us from within… fresh graves on the holy… hurry Alain, hurry…

Vardon stared down through the spirit's shoulder to see several pages of dull white parchment paper. The monk's hand was scribbling furiously in a language that did not resemble his native French.

…this evil unleashed…

Vardon stepped carefully around to stand beside the monk, giving himself a view of the table as the man wrote. He stood silently, trying to be as invisible as he could while the man went on with the letter.

… Thibaud has opened…we should have known…dear God someone should have been able to see…vile odor of…folly…

Vardon watched as the man shook his head over certain phrases and offered prayers at intervals. Suddenly, the monk stopped. He rose from his seat and walked past Vardon to the door. The monk leaned against the hinged wooden wall and listened intently for a moment. Rage visited his eyes, followed by a bolt of shock. Finally, there was only a quiet, resigned look of despair as Vardon saw him return to the table. With a heavy sigh the monk slumped into his chair and continued with his correspondence.

…brother of Or…welcomed…no longer spoken of…why Thibaud…in God's name why?

The boy was witness to several more minutes of the brother penning his epistle at a frenzied pace. Uneasiness permeated the gray walls of the small room, eating its way into disposition of all things there. Vardon began to fidget, rubbing his hands together and pacing around the desk behind the monk. A sense of reckoning simmered in the air, heating the emotional feel of the chamber to a near boil. The little thief wanted to escape, wanted to find his way back to the streets of Baronne. Even the greatest dangers of the street were to be feared less than Maudire.

oh no…

Suddenly, the monk shoved himself away from the table, sending Vardon sprawling to the floor. The thief landed hard, banging his head on the far wall. Through a hazy glance, the boy saw the brother on his hands and knees, a hand running gingerly over the nitre encrusted stone. Bubbling up from within the mortar was a muddied green slime. It oozed thickly from the ground, engulfing the rear legs of the table.

the floor… it is stained with…Dear God…we are too late.

Grabbing the parchment, the priest rolled it up and tied it off with a string. As the boy got back to his feet, he found himself staring into the eyes of the monk. Pain mingled with resolve swirled deep in the translucent orbs. The young thief was transfixed to the spot by the penetrating gaze. In that sorrow Vardon found his purpose for being in this place at this time. His personal history, all the petty thieving, the Marquis' men chasing him, all of it had made a path to this once hallowed ground. A power higher than himself had brought him beyond the horrors of Maudire. The thief had survived them and now received the reward of that destiny. His hand trembling, the boy took the scroll.

A contented smile spread across the face of the priest. The man sank to his knees, taking the penitent posture of prayer. A rosary was drawn from his cassock and the monk began to pray.

Our Father who art in heaven…

Vardon had been so engrossed in his exchange with the monk that he had not noticed the oozing fluid. It had now covered the table and was spreading up the walls. The silk cloth of the priest's vestments was being enveloped and the emerald liquid crawled up onto the man's ankles. An anguished grimace grew form on the face that had just been serene. Tendrils of black, acrid smoke rose from the brother's legs. Vardon reeled as the man screamed. A string of unintelligible words streamed forth in the agony of the priest's final moments. Vardon stood in devastating silence as the body of the monk was swallowed up in the putrid flow. Skin melted away from the face of the man, dripping in slushy puddles to the floor. One last excruciating shriek escaped the mouth of the priest, and the body was enveloped.

It came now for Vardon. The thief was beyond being worried about ghostly monks within, or armed soldiers without. All that mattered now was getting out of the cathedral. The thief bolted through the sanctuary and narthex, skipping over chairs and around the great table. He slipped once and stumbled, crashing into the floor. Over his shoulder he glimpsed the verdant tide rising and falling over the ground he had just covered. Scrambling to his feet, the boy narrowly escaped a wave as it splashed right behind him. Drops of the liquid splattered onto his ragged cloak, burning away the cloth and searing his skin. The burns on his back drove him to greater speed, and Vardon rushed the doors in the narthex, crashing through into the rising morning. He looked back long enough to see the final surge of the rank smelling tide die on the threshold.

The little thief stared into the rising sun, free.

V

"The archbishop should have sanctioned this a long time ago."

Two men, dressed in the crimson cassocks of bishops, stood alongside a cadre of officers. One, a man of advanced age, held aloft a white scroll.

"I think it best that all of the *monastère* dies today."

"Yes," agreed the first. "Best that the past remain in the past. A story untold."

Using a flambeau that one of the soldiers carried, he ignited the paper. He handed the paper to one of the officers and motioned toward the cathedral. Several other men joined the officer and began setting fire to the cathedral. As the wooden supports burned, the weight of the stones brought the structure to ruin. Flames licked around the stones to seek out all the fuel that had been the frame of the interior.

"What of the boy?" asked the older bishop. "He knows."

The other man looked gravely at his elder. "The boy is a ward of the church now. In fact, he serves as my personal valet."

"But what if he tells any of the brethren at your parish?"

The younger bishop motioned and an officer approached. The bishop reached into his cloak and removed a small wooden box. He lifted the lid and held it for the older man to see. A bloodied lump of flesh lay inside. He handed it to the soldier and it was cast into the fire.

"I don't believe my valet will be telling anyone this or any other story."

The End

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continued from page 21

Steeling myself, I stared at it and demanded, "You better leave this house immediately." I'd heard of people scaring off bears by standing up to them; perhaps that affected my sense of logic. Honestly, I think I was too scared to think rationally.

The teeth opened, revealing a maw filled with fine strands of something like cobwebs. Out came a hollow laugh. It sounded more like a horse bellowing in pain, but the challenging look in its eyes told me the sound was a laugh.

I froze.

My wife urged me to move, but I could not.

The thing shifted, looming up against me. Goose flesh covered my body. I had grown up in the northern Rocky Mountains and was familiar with winter winds that reached negative forty on the wind chill factor. Yet, in the still of my mother's house, I had never felt such cold before.

Its voice rumbled like heavy boulders shifting in a shallow river. "Why would I leave?"

I was desperate. "Because if you don't…"

"You'll what?" It moved to my right and stood before me.

I panicked. "In life or death, I'll find you and make you regret meeting me."

Again the hollow laugh. The eyes, or the fiery presence in the eye sockets, looked amused.

"I'll find a way to put you through such pain as you've never felt." My threats sounded hollow in my own ears.

The laughter stopped, and the face scowled. Then, hands wearing flesh like tattered gloves reached for my throat. They felt like dry ice, so cold they burned. "I suppose that is possible. There are ways," it said. The hands waited, taunting.

Nothing existed around me except that thing. The room, my wife, all disappeared from my consciousness. All I could think about was surviving. The best way I could think to do that was to distract it. "What do you mean, there are ways?"

"Ways to hurt one such as me."

"Then you better let me go."

Something like a growl was all it said.

"Not many know the ways, and you don't impress me--few do--no, you're no fighter, Barry. But it would matter little. Pain is pleasure, for the damned." It seemed to disappear, but I could tell it had not left. Its voice moved to the far corner of the room where a swivel rocker moved like it had been bumped. "Do you know how many we are?"

I shook my head to clear it and contemplated trying to break free and run away. My wife sat next to me, cowering in tears and pleading with me to get up, but I could not. The thing had such a control over me. She looked desperate. Her words faded as my mind slowed. Thoughts flowed like sap in winter. My mind was nearly as frozen as my throat.

"As many as the sands of the sea." The voice deepened. "But we're not all the same. You haven't seen one before, have you, Barry?"

I remember wishing it did not know my name. "No… one what? What are you?"

"That's because most aren't strong enough to be seen, or felt." It began to come toward me again. "Most don't show themselves to each other. But, you think you're going to find me? Think you're going to challenge me? Think you're going to win?" It was right next to me again. The voice carried no breath, but an icy puff stung my eyes. "Try it, and you'll die the second death."

In all truth, I am a passive person and have been most of my life. Even when I was a kid, I knew when to avoid conflict. There were some kids that I had avoided, and others that I had strategically befriended. Whatever humanity once lived in this creature seemed to be gone. Completely. I had no doubts. It was not bluffing. Avoiding it was out of the question. Even though

the thing repulsed and terrified me, I thought my very survival might turn on taking a different approach.

"What do you mean that others like you don't have the power to be seen?"

It stopped. "You can tell the strength of a spectre in two ways. First, only the strong can be felt. Second, only the strongest can be seen." It drew its face near and revealed the disgusting detail of its countenance in an ugly gray light.

"I believe you. What did you mean when you said I'd die the second death?"

"It used to be that we mixed among our kind, had a society of sorts. We used to challenge one another, and battle until one proved superior." A wistfulness flashed across its face before the scowl returned. "Of course there were those of our kind who did not approve of our challenges, who were sympathetic to the humanity that stuck with us after passing from mortality. They didn't stop the challenges though. But something did. One spectre discovered the second death by accident." A long, bony finger traced my jaw. "Reputations fell. Challenges stopped. Most went into hiding."

Tears brimmed in my eyes from the pain of its touch.

It continued, "The challenges normally ended with someone so hurt that he'd be out of sorts for a month or more, but he'd recover. The second death destroyed the last living part of us. Once spectres started dying, our society disappeared. Most wouldn't even show themselves to each other for fear that they'd be challenged."

"So, that's why you came to me? You miss the challenge?" I should have checked the sarcasm in my voice. Fingers closed around my throat, and the burning cold returned.

"Perhaps."

Death could have taken me at any time. The cold was so intense that I would have almost welcomed it.

"So, you can't see the other 'spectres'?" I asked.

The voice rumbled in my ear, and the hand held my throat in an icy grip. But, the thing disappeared completely. "Not even those spectres who had risen to the top of our ranks will show themselves. Cowards fear being challenged. What we had is now gone. What is left isn't even death's envy."

"When did this happen?"

"Around 1830, but the seeds of our decline were laid the century before that."

A thought struck me. I was desperate to find something that might save my life, even if it might cause much greater harm. The fingers pressed more firmly, and my breath came out in frosty clouds. "I have an idea. If …you let go… I'll share it." My tongue felt thick and slow to work the words in my mouth. The grip lightened and amusement returned to the eyes.

Again, the low chuckle rumbled in my ear. "Some just beg for mercy."

"I'm serious. Hear me out." I reached to grab at the invisible wrist, but the hand clenched and I nearly choked. I held my hands up, pleading. "Are you known to the other spectres?"

The laugh sounded purely evil. "Yes. I am the known as the one who knows the secret of the second death."

That changed what I had been thinking, but only a little. "But, nobody lets another see his face, is that right?"

"Yes."

"If I had an idea that would bring others out of hiding, would that be of use to you?"

The spectre blew an icy breeze into my face, nearly freezing my eyes. It said nothing, but I interpreted that as an invitation to go on.

"Would you let me go if I told you how you might?" I trembled.

It laughed again. "Tell me and find out."

I wanted some assurance that it would let me go, that it would leave and never return. But, I was in its grasp and had little of importance to offer. All I had was my idea. I gambled and shook my head.

My body stiffened from the pain that followed. I jerked uncontrollably. Yet, something about my offer must have intrigued the spectre. It lightened its grip. I could feel its stare upon me. "If what you have to say is worthwhile, I'll release you. If not…"

It was something. I quickly blurted through chattering teeth, "What if you challenged one spectre in the name of another. You claim to be a certain spectre of great renown and claim that you desire to unite the spectres once again?"

"The one whose name I used would be forced to face me. Call me a fraud. Show himself, or live with the acts I do in his name." The face appeared close to mine with a smile. "There are names that would draw spirits. We could emerge from obscurity once again. I wouldn't have to waste my time plucking spectres from the living."

The grip around my throat released and I sucked in deep breaths of air, failing to satisfy frozen lungs. "See, it is a good idea. Since I helped you, will you let me go?" I pleaded, fearing for the horror that I may have unleashed.

It laughed again. "Barry, I think you might prove useful – I'll let you go… if that is what you want."

Something gnawed at my stomach like a mouse at a grain sack, and I wondered about what I had just done. How far-reaching would that horrible idea of mine stretch? It didn't matter, I assured myself. I had my family and myself to look after. Besides, it was toothpaste out of the tube. I couldn't undo what I had done. The coldness lingered about me and I looked at the spectre, seeing the horrible strands of its rotting maw wavering through an evil smile. Seeing the thing's stare made me reconsider its last words and tremble.

"Why don't you go? You told me I was free, that you'd let me live."

The rumbling laugh brought gooseflesh to my arms and neck. "No. I said I'd let you go. But, where will you go, Barry? You've been dead for nearly ten minutes."

Instinctively, I looked down and felt myself. The gray wash that covered the thing now painted me as well – I was a shadow and icy cold. I cried out in anguish, but it only laughed louder.

"Now, you can serve me, or taste the second death."

The End

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continued from page 30

Ry-anne saw power and cruelty and wisdom in those unforgiving onyx eyes. Darker than Ry-anne's own mahogany. Darker than night and every bit as frightening. Her hair was steely grey, streaked with faded black, reminding Ry-anne that this woman was once a young girl such as herself. Had that young girl been so overwhelmed that she passed out before her Grand, as she had done?

"Of course not," the Grand said.

Ry-anne jumped. Oh Grand, she can hear my thoughts? Even when I'm not thinking as mentals? Better stop thinking then—what? How can you do tha -? Oh Ry-anne you're so dumb, what are you even doing here?

"Are you quite finished?" The Grand asked. There was no smile on this monarch's regal face. No expression of humanity. She was a thing. A ruler. And she was completely terrifying.

"Y-yes, my Grand." Ry-anne flushed and straightened. She ought not let this woman frighten her.

"Oh yes you ought, child. Power is frightening. You would be stupid not to recognize that."

"Right. Of course, my Grand." Was that a compliment?

"No. Now let us begin our spell class before you waste any more of my time. Tell me everything you know." The Grand clasped her hands together and settled back into the chair.

"Excuse me? I mean yes, Grand. But…starting from where?"

The Grand sighed and the chair creaked. Ry-anne stood before her, the most powerful and magnificent woman in the Dimension. The one who kept it all together. And she, stupid fuzzy haired ginger nut Ry-anne had muck on her dress from collapsing in front of her. She would never gain The Grand's respect.

"Start with what you know best. Come now."

"Uh, well...Magic is key to our Dimension, for it could not be maintained without it and the Demon Dimension or the Dimension of the Dead would close in and Glandor would be corrupted, to this we owe thanks to the Grand and her unrelenting -"

"Did I ask for a history lesson? No child, I think not."

Ry-anne still floundered under the Grand's aura of awesome power. Stubbornly, she made herself solid and stood her ground. The Guard's presence beside the Grand's chair made Ry-anne doubly nervous. She wished it was Markooth instead.

Comfort, Ry. You are doing well.

She had no time to cast back; every moment was precious as she struggled to remember spell classes. Meanwhile the Grand waited impatiently as the time mounted and the silence thickened. Ry-anne's underarms were damp and she would have killed to scratch one tender nipple, which was itching like crazy. Her lower stomach still ached and she felt sticky stuff leak from her private parts and stain her under-wrap. Why had she not thought to stuff a scrap of cloth down there this morn? Pray Grand it doesn't leak through and stain my cream robe!

Ry-anne bit her lip. "Well…um…I put a spell on Kelthro once." It was all she could think to say.

Oh no! Ry-anne cried mentally.

Calm it, calm it. It's all right, Markooth sent back.

But why did I have to come out with that?

Because that's you… I mean, it's no problem Ry-anne. Just elaborate. It was an efficient spell.

The Grand raised one thick, grey eyebrow. "Continue."

"Well I made Kelthro get back three times whatever he gave out to…ah," *Oh I'm sorry*

Markooth.

Never matter. There are no secrets from the Grand.

"Whatever he gave to my Pair," she finished quietly.

A pursed lip. "Yes, I saw the bruises. Young Kelthro was mighty displeased that day. That was a—an acceptable spell, for your age. However it is wrong to use magic for hurt, you know that. I let you away with it because, well, Kelthro is a sour-ass."

Ry-anne gaped—then remembered to be polite and closed her mouth. The Grand said Kelthro was an ass. An *ass!* With Markooth outside and all.

"Well he is," the Grand shrugged. "But he is a troubled man. They all are." Her onyx eyes wandered, lost in memory.

"It is no excuse to -"

"No, taking your anger out on another is not excusable. But in Kelthro's case, poor dear Kelthro, well it's certainly understandable."

Markooth? Do you -?

I have no idea what she's talking about. His own confusion spilled over into Ry-anne's mind.

"Now, list me all the herbs that can be used in a good health spell."

Ry-anne bit her lip, inwardly cursing. She looked up, trying to access her brain, which was obviously taking the aft off.

The Grand finally allowed Ry-anne to leave when she was hoarse and unhappy—and understandably disgusted with her lack of knowledge. Yet Ry-anne did know these things—she just couldn't recall them on the spot. But it wouldn't do to whine. Instead, she bowed humbly and shuffled out near tears.

She hates me, Ry-anne told Markooth.

Markooth stood chatting to a man who had apparently come to relieve him for the eve shift. *Then she doesn't know you,* he replied. *And the Grand knows everyone and everything. So she can't possibly hate you.*

But I'm a complete dumb horse. She's going to get my path changed.

I thought you didn't want to do it anyway? His curiosity burned.

Ry-anne cut off their conversation. "I'm leaving—I'm exhausted. Good eve, sirs." She nodded to a tall wiry man and headed off gratefully towards the stairs.

"Good eve, Geddon. Wait, Ry-anne, I'll walk you back to your wing. The bells will ring for eve meal soon." They descended the steps in silence, and when he opened the door she gaped. Outside was black.

"How long was I in there?"

Markooth smiled. "What do you think?"

Ry-anne looked at the sky. The world was in darkness and the grass was black as coal, yet the sky was a pale blue, the clouds grey swabs of cloth strewn across it. Where had all the time gone?

They walked side by side. There was no breeze, only a faint chill and very few people wandered about the grounds. "When are you going to tell your Immediates?"

Ry-anne sighed. "Grand, I'd almost forgot about that. How do you think they'll react? Mother Gamine will probably swell with importance and Father Johann. Oh my. He'll just wince and suffer it, but he'll all the time be thinking of how my life is over."

Markooth draped her with comfort**.** *It won't be all that horrible.*

And how do you know?

I relent. But I will be there for you.

Ry-anne looked up into Markooth's kind, golden eyes. A mysterious dark brown, but flashing gold whenever the moons shone upon them. She smiled but he looked away, embarrassed. Silence prevailed a while and they passed around the whole House, neither feeling like stopping there. They continued their walk on towards the public stables.

Ry-anne spoke up. "Did you know that Lefus was going to be my mentals trainer?"

Markooth shrugged. "At some point."

So why didn't you tell me? she wanted to know, but stopped short of asking and faced Markooth. "Tell me what happened to his Pair? And do not brush me off with more don't asks."

"Well you shouldn't ask. It is not my place to say."

"If he's going to be my trainer then I need to know! He's not gentle, you know. I found that much out this morn. And before I go back tomorrow—if I do—then I need to know if he's…you know…"

"Dangerous?" Markooth's face twisted with a bad emotion, and he sighed. A flash of anger at her selfishness was culled as quickly as it was ignited. That thoughtfulness was almost humbling, but she still insisted on knowing what happened to Lefus' Pair. She had a right.

"If you want to know Lefus' personal secrets so desperately then why don't you just ask him?"

"Fine. I will."

"I was being sarcastic!"

"Don't shout at me."

A deep breath from Markooth. "I apologize. But take heed Ry-anne; whatever you do, do not ask Lefus of his Pair. It causes him great pain and there is no need to provoke…"

"So he is dangerous then?"

"Will you just listen? Can you do that? I mean, is it possible?"

Ry-anne sulked and folded her arms. Markooth's anger seemed to melt. He thought she looked cute. The danger was gone between them and she could breathe again. She inhaled the scent of honey spice that floated around him of late—perhaps to cover the stink of body odour.

You ought to wash more. Yacky.

Yes, mother.

"I'm just saying, there's no need to aggravate my brother. And perhaps it would not be wise to do so. However, as your trainer, I have perfect faith in Lefus. After Marlena's death, he poured himself into mentals and spell learning. He was determined he would not let something bad happen to anybody he cared for again."

"Marlena? So he did have a Pair! How did she die? Did he…?"

"Ry-anne!"

She lowered her head. "Sorry." But she wasn't, not really.

"Never matter, but just let us leave it there. Save to say that Lefus did not, *not*—you hear me—have anything to do with Marlena's death. It was a complete, freak accident—just like -"

Like Kyna's. The words sprang to his mind but he stopped them. But Ry-anne still caught hold of his intent and it hurt. She tried push the pain away and leave it for later.

When next he spoke, his words were soft. "It was an accident, Ry-anne. But whether Lefus believes that is something else altogether." Ry-anne yearned to know more but Markooth blocked her. "I said we ought to leave it at that. Now do you understand why you shouldn't query Lefus on this?"

Ry-anne nodded begrudgingly, secretly trying to figure ways she could bring it into the

conversation. But having a real conversation with Lefus would be like spreading jam on eggs. It just wasn't right. And then an odd thought crept into her head—so you are going back to train next morn?

Of a sudden, the bells rang.

"Come on, shall I walk you back the House? You must be famished—I know I am."

Ry-anne shook her head.

I can't face their questions.

You'll have to face them sooner or later, Markooth sent gently.

Later will do just fine. She giggled.

They went instead to Markooth's house and sneaked some cold eggs, ham slices and fresh juice. They ate their spoils against the back of the stables—which Ry-anne still would not enter—in companionable quiet. Markooth mentioned that his hair was getting sheared the next morn so he could receive his tattoo. Ry-anne lamented the loss of it, which she had always wanted to run her fingers through. But the tattoo sounded like fun. There was something thrilling about it—it singled him out as an elite Guard to the Grand. And for that she was proud.

Later, as the chill air grew cold and her eyelids tugged downwards, Ry-anne got to thinking. Markooth was right—she would have to tell her Immediates about the Allocation at some point. But when? Whenever it seemed real? She had no answer when that would be.

* * *

Ry-anne awoke with a start. Confusion swarmed until she woke more fully and realized that they had fallen asleep outside the barn. Markooth had one heavy arm draped over her waist and his body was tucked in close. And although she ached and her lower abdomen throbbed abominably, she dared not move lest it disturbed Markooth's peaceful rhythm. Instead she gazed at his bronzed arms and large hands, watching the tiny golden hairs on his forearms catch the sun as he breathed in and out. Followed the veins from wrist to knuckles, saw the tendons move when his fingers twitched. And this arm was attached to a body—Markooth's body—fitting snugly behind her. She felt his breath tickle her hair and realized that his lips were close enough to kiss her neck. Just the thought of that made her shiver.

Her mind spun with fantasies.

A throbbing down below reminded her of the relentless pain in her stomach. She looked down and her eyes widened in horror. Blood stained her lower robe. Not just a speck but a huge sprawling mess of red-brown. And worse, it smelled. Oh great Grand! Markooth could not see this—it was disgusting. He would never want to look upon her again.

Carefully, she tried to worm out of his arms. But then his hand twitched and she froze. Markooth groaned and hugged her close, his hand rubbing her lower down her abdomen until his fingers were smeared with blood.

She winced. *Oh Grand*! Any other time it would have been wonderful to be fondled by Markooth, but now it was absolutely mortifying. She had to get out of there.

Heart banging, she wriggled out from under his arm. She was almost free when he awoke. She went inert and discretely tucked the skirt into her legs, trying to hide the blood, all wet and cold on her thighs. It didn't work. So she rested her hands over it, trying unsuccessfully to make the position seem casual. *Oh Grand oh Grand oh Grand.*

"Did we sleep out here? Holy Grand." Came Markooth's sleepy voice. When he noticed that his hand lay over Ry-anne's hip he snatched it away sharply. "Forgive me."

She didn't move.

"Ry? Are you awake?" She didn't answer. He peered over and she rolled away so that her face was almost in the dust.

"Go way!" she said, muffled.

"Why, what've I done? Ry-anne what is it? Grand, please. Tell me I didn't hurt you."

"What?" That scared her. One hand grabbed at her shoulder and tried to haul her around to face him. His fingers pinched. Frightened, Ry-anne shook him off and scrambled up.

"Markooth!" she warned.

But his eyes were taking in the blood. Ry-anne looked down—then back up. He was trembling.

"I should never have let myself get this close to you."

"We're Pairs, fat horse! We're supposed to be close!"

"No." He raised one hand. It shook. "Not at our age. Everyody always feared I would take advantage of you, didn't they? But did I? Ry-anne tell me!"

Ry-anne backed away, sandals crunching over the gritty dust. "Don't be absurd—you didn't do anything," she whispered, cheeks burning with embarrassment.

"Then what is that?" he cried, pointing at the blood. At that moment she wanted to crumple up and disappear. "Tell me please, what *is* that!"

Ry-anne flinched when Markooth's voice cracked. Wearily, he put his hand to his face and then looked at it. It was the one with the blood on it. His eyes stretched wider and he looked like he might be sick. But he wasn't, he just fell to his knees and pressed his forehead to the dust.

Stunned, Ry-anne glanced around. If somebody saw this—Kelthro, or even Lefus—then there'd surely be trouble. Mercifully there was nobody about. She swallowed and took a fearful step forward, trying to delve into Markooth's mind.

She snatched back instantly and suppressed a yelp. Too much turmoil. Bad images and thoughts. And worse—utter self-hatred. Compassion overrode her fear and she crouched next to him and very hesitantly touched a hand to his shoulder. He jerked wildly.

"Away Ry-anne! Leave me be!" Gone were his gentle, golden eyes. In their place was a reckless, snarling gaze.

"No," she squeaked. "I can't leave you. Pairs are forever."

"You stupid child!" It started out as a yell that became a whimper and his eyes, which had previously been raging, now died. He pressed his head back to the ground.

Ry-anne stared at him for a thousand heartbeats. Watching as he struggled to slow his breathing, but then some stray thought would set him off again and he would murmur, "Oh Grand!" and shake his head against the earth.

She licked her lips. "Markooth?"

"Please," he implored. "Just tell me I didn't hurt you. Tell me I didn't do anything. Tell me what that blood is."

She thought it would kill her to say it. But faced with her flailing Pair, it came easily. "It's just my…my cycle."

Markooth was still. He raised his head and stared into her soul with anxious, hopeful eyes. It was his weakness more than his anger that scared her to the core. Markooth had always been the strong one—the one *she* relied on to get her through the dark days when guilt over Kyna threatened to drag her down, when the nightmares wrenched her awake. Yet now *he* needed her. It was her first taste of responsibility and for a moment she wasn't sure she could stand it.

"Really?"

The balance in their relationship was briefly upset. It felt uncomfortable to be the stronger one. " My first one," she said, louder now. "I would have been more prepared otherwise. You…you didn't do anything."

Markooth closed his eyes, finally calm. He sat back on folded legs and slumped. "I'm so sorry."

Tentatively, she edged closer and kneeled down beside him. She bunched her robes up so he couldn't see the blood and sighed. "Will you tell me why it worried you so much?"

Markooth went to rub his face again but stopped when he remembered the blood. Ry-anne grabbed his hand with a clean section of her robe and wiped it. "Sorry." Her cheeks were still flaming.

He struggled for a smile. "Thanks."

"So…will you tell me?"

"I don't think I really know enough to tell you anything. Besides, maybe you're too young -"

"Oh don't give me that cack. I'm your Pair—that's all that matters."

"But I don't know anything, not really. Just snatched thoughts I've got from my…father. From Mother. Josephine too, 'times. Something's wrong in our family, Ry, but I can only guess what it is." He glanced up and she smiled encouragement. "Lefus and I…I don't think we're Kelthro's."

Ry-anne blinked. "Not really Kelthro's?" she repeated. "Then whose?"

Apparenly, it was the question he'd been dreading. "Not *whose*." His look challenged her to work it out and still not hate him.

Grand, it was suddenly hard to breathe. "What? You think you're not…? You think that… something…"

"Oh, I don't know. But sometimes," he clutched her wrist, "sometimes I feel something in me, Ry. Something wrong. Bad."

Bad? Evil…like the crow man? It took all Ry-anne's strength not to shake. "No. There's nothing wrong with you. There's nothing bad."

"But -"

"No!" She stood up, shakily. "No. Markooth I'm sorry, but I—I've got to…I've got training and—and you've got to get your tattoo. I'll see you later…" She ran away from him and felt his sorrow at this abandonment as keenly as if he'd done it to her. But she kept running, head swimming. And she never looked back.

SEVEN

Markooth entered the house and paused on the first floor when he heard his father's booming voice questioning Lefus.

"What by Grand was all that shouting about, boy? And why was that girl here so early?"

"I'm sure I do not know, Father," Lefus said. "Now if you'll excuse me I have to get to the House—work."

A grunt. "That girl."

Markooth tensed and crept closer.

"Yes, that girl," Lefus said. "You know, she's coming along surprisingly well in mentals. She definitely has something."

"Something for what, boy? Just what is her Allocation? Why are you teaching her?"

"I can't tell you that, Father. Not until she announces herself."

"Oh, keeping secrets are we?"

Markooth's own fists curled at their father's provocative comment. He was sure Lefus' did the same. "It's her secret, Kelthro. I'm just following orders."

"What did you call me?"

"Oh, you heard me."

There was the sound of a brief scuffle. "Why do you insist on goading me, boy?"

"I goad you by my mere presence, Father. There's hardly anything I can do about that now, is there?"

"Right, you little -"

Markooth sprang into action. But he was too late to prevent any damage. However, he was just in time to see Lefus swing a bone-striking right. Kelthro fell—hard.

Markooth took in Kelthro's semi-unconscious state. Their father was flat out, a little blood trickling from his left nostril. "Why did you do that?"

Lefus swallowed blood from a bleeding lip and shook his head. He stepped over Kelthro and shoved past his younger brother. "I was looking after your hide, you ungrateful runt," he muttered and clomped down the staircase.

"Really? And who do you think he'll take it out on when he comes round?" Markooth shouted.

You just wish you had the nerve to do it, Lefus sent.

Markooth did not reply, intent on trying to rouse his father. Lefus slammed the door on his way out.

* * *

After the row with Markooth, Ry-anne ran all the way back to the East Wing. She knew she shouldn't have left him—not in that state—but she couldn't bear to stay. She did not *want* to contemplate what Markooth had been babbling about. Was her Pair in trouble mentally? She'd heard horror stories about what happened when one Pair went mad and the other, obviously knitted into the same mind, was dragged along with them.

Luckily, Ry-anne managed to stay out of people's way on the way back. She crouched behind a colorful rhododendron until someone passed and then darted forward again, only to

take refuge behind a statue, waiting for her next chance. Thus, in fits and starts, she returned to the East Wing. Tucking the long robes into her legs she waddled up the stairs, along the corridor and towards her room. She heard Mother Gamine and all the usual getting up noises and was just about make it undiscovered when -

"Hey!"

Ry-anne tensed and relaxed all in one heartbeat. "Oh hi Gwyn," she said, making sure she faced away from Gwyneth.

"You're up early."

"I went for a walk."

"Oh. Me and Davvy are splitting," Gwyneth chirped and then went back to her room. From inside she yelled, "Just thought you'd like to know. Maybe you can tell Markooth I'm available?"

Ry-anne closed her own door. Everybody was going mad! Gwyn and Davvy splitting? Pairs didn't split—not often anyway. She peeled off the filthy robe and wrap, balled it up and shoved it under the bed to deal with later. What could be so wrong that they had to split? Ry-anne took a cloth and soaked it into the freezing water pail. She nearly yelped when it touched her bare skin and hurriedly washed herself. The water turned pink. Oh Grand! She'd have to tip it before their maid came in.

And what had Gwyneth said about telling Markooth she was available? Not likely, she thought furiously as she wound on a clean under-wrap and a fresh robe. She was just about sick of Gwyneth's 'harmless' flirting, as Markooth called it.

"Ry-anne! You up and about yet?" Mother Gamine shouted from down the corridor.

Ry-anne sighed, fiddling with the robe tie and then going to work on her hair. "Yes!"

Gamine's footsteps thudded down the corridor. Ry-anne quickly shoved the water pail back under the dresser just before the door opened. "Oh good, you're dressed—and you've made your bed! You should let the servants worry about such things, sweetheart. So. Are you going to stop this nonsense and tell us about your Allocation yet? We heard that you're training with Markooth's brother. If you're using mentals, it can't be that bad."

"Oh Mammy!" Ry-anne cried and snatched up the worn white ribbon Johann had given her when she was Paired. She pulled her hair into a ponytail and tied the ribbon roughly around it.

"Honestly, I don't know why you insist on always putting your hair up. It's not very ladylike, you know. And it's such a wonderful color this time of year. But tell me your path, love. Not that I'm trying to rush you but we all want you to know that we'll love you no matter what you're doing…"

"I have to go, Mother. I'm late." She kissed Gamine's plump cheek and rushed down the corridor.

"Ry-anne! Ry-anne get back here!"

"But I'm late, Mammy!" she shouted, clattering down the staircase. She bolted out of the East Wing towards the garden—too rattled to go to training. What she really wanted was time to herself, to wander around and brood about Markooth. And think about her Allocation. But there was no privacy anywhere—not even in her own mind. Markooth kept butting in and worrying. Are you all right? Are you all right? He asked constantly. Yes yes yes—but I'm busy. Just leave me alone. Right, of course, he would say. But are you all right? It was enough to send anyone mad.

In the end, Ry-anne's aimless wandering brought her to the statue garden, and Markooth finally allowed her some space when he went to get his hair sheared and the tattoo inscribed. He made her promise they would share the eve after the one coming, when he was on morn shift.

Ordinarily, that length of time without seeing him would have been painful, but now she actually felt that they needed it.

Ry-anne leaned against Madrea's figure when Lefus eventually arrived, without so much as an apology. "You're late," she said. In actual fact, she hadn't been there long at all but was about to attack him for the sake of it anyway, when she saw that his lip was swollen. The rest of him wasn't too pretty either. Did Kelthro beat up on Lefus, too? No, he wouldn't dare. Lefus had probably got the busted lip from brawling in one of the village ale houses. Probably picked the fight too. Served him right.

"Yes it is a lovely morn, isn't it?" he said, looking her up and down. Ry-anne followed his eyes and shot him an evil look. He ignored it. "Come," he said and walked off in the direction of the House.

"Now what?" she moaned, trudging after him. After a while, she realized their direction. "We're going back to the House? Well why didn't you tell me before—I could have met you there? I've just come from there for Grand's sake…"

"Watch your mouth!"

"Make me," she muttered.

Lefus whirled around. He kicked the legs from beneath her and pinned her to the grass. Lastly, he clamped a hand over her mouth. "There," he said smugly.

"Mmph! Mm mmph mm Mm mmphin mmphmmph!"

"Oh I'm sorry, you're not making much sense. What did you say? You think I'm wonderfully attractive?"

"MMPHH!" She wrestled beneath him and flung out violently with mentals. He sprung off into the air and she missed. "I said get off me you blazing fool-horse!" Her hair was wild and she projected daggers with her eyes. Grand, what if somebody had seen him lying on top of her like that?

Lefus resettled to the ground and folded his arms. He nodded his head. "Very good. We'll be doing more of that this morn. Come." He turned his back and walked off. Eventually, with a sigh, Ry-anne followed.

"No, no, no, no, no—I'm not going in there," she said when she caught up, immediately walking the other way. Lefus yanked her back. She shook him off. "I told you, I'm not -"

"Why?" he asked. "Because that's where your Destiny lies? Because you have strange 'memories' of that room even though you've never been in it?"

She eyed him, frowning. "So you understand then. Look, I don't really feel like training this morn, if that's all right?" She moved to go but Lefus hauled her back again.

"No. It is definitely not all right. You think when you Rise to your Allocation that you can just take a day off whenever you feel like it?"

She looked away and swallowed. "Don't be a prig. I'm not that stupid."

"Oh, aren't you?"

Her eyes blazed with fire. "Well why can't we just practice outside in the garden like last morn? "S'all I was saying."

Lefus sighed. "Because the way I see it, this room is going to be important in the future. When you reach the age of your Allocation, here is where you will battle for the right to Rise to your prophesied place. You need to be comfortable in it. There can't be any ghosts to distract you when you're in there, so the sooner you lay those ghosts down the better."

"I don't want to Rise."

"Too bad for you then."

She took an angry breath and stood there in stubborn silence. Lefus lost his patience. He stuck a brass key in the dusty hole, twisted and threw back the doors. Ry-anne gasped, exposed to the full, unadulterated dread that had always lurked within that room.

Oh my Grand, she wanted to say. But no words would come out. In her head throbbed the battle. She watched the shadowy but unmistakably brutal images play as if it was all happening to somebody else. She struggled for breath. Her cheeks flushed magenta and she stiffened, as if bracing against a tide of icy water. Her eyes went wide, frozen on memories that had not even happened yet…

…The battle room was a huge rectangle the size of the grazing fields. Only Family and a few honored villagers from representative areas were crowded in. They fit around the four sides like a higgledy-piggledy line of soldiers.

Somebody stood in the center. Her Challenger.

An older Ry-anne walked alone to the center of the floor. Her bare feet padding over the polished wood were the only sounds in the hall, apart from a few nervous coughs and shuffles of the feet or sneezes. Young Ry-anne watched the elder version spot Gwyneth, Johann and Gamine in the blurry crowd. Their presence calmed the older version somewhat.

The Priestess began to speak. "Now the worthy will do battle to judge who is the most deserving of the seat of the Grand. If one will fall today then the standing Challenger will be named Grand. However if nobody falls this whole day, then you shall both fight again the following morn and the morn after that until one of you does. Is that understood?" The words were spoken slowly and distorted—as if underwater, but the older Ry-anne understood.

"Yes your highness," said Ry-anne. Her voice sounded surprisingly clear and strong in the large room.

The Challenger, an obscure figure, nodded deeply.

The mood in the hall was strange. The time of the Rise was both exciting and anticipatory—a cause for festival, thought old Ry-anne. But always was it one of great sadness, too. For it was when the current Grand, who had cared for and protected the land for a whole generation, passed over.

"Ready?" the Priestess asked.

Ry-anne sucked in a deep breath. "I am, your highness." She watched the Challenger. His darkened face nodded slowly.

"Take the positions."

On the Priestess's mark, the two of them flew into the air. The Challenging fighter beat Ry-anne to the position and young Ry-anne somehow felt that was not desired. She could just about make out her older version's face but not the Challenger's, who had his back to her. They hovered a head's distance from the ceiling, the eyes of the Family below staring up at them, waiting for the Priestesses signal to begin. Ry-anne could hear her own breaths. The closeness of the Challenger caused the older Ry-anne pain. She struggled to push the feeling away.

"Begin."

The signal from the Priestess made old Ry-anne inhale sharply. She hadn't been expecting it. Immediately, the Challenger struck out. Ry-anne's body was hurtled towards the wall behind her. Panicking, she scraped together a cushion, slowed time and –

And young Ry-anne collapsed.

* * *

It was Lefus who was there when she came around, sprawled on the floor outside the battle room. It should have been Markooth. Lefus who helped her sit up and silently gave her some water. Lefus who had thoughtfully closed the battle room and locked it up tight.

"Perhaps that is enough for today," he said.

"It's enough for the rest of my life."

He laughed. "Can you stand?"

"Course I can," she said. And she did, but only with his help. For a brief instant, she glanced into his black eyes and actually saw the blacker circles of his pupils. It made those shadowy pits seem almost normal. And there was something else, too. A brief flicker of feeling, as if Lefus had temporarily opened up, revealing just what he was made of. And for the second time Ry-anne got a heady dose that she had seen this before. Lefus' expression reminded her sharply of Markooth's that morn. She looked again to be sure, but the expression was gone. He was closed up as tight as the battle room.

"I need to lie down," she lied and Lefus nodded, saying he would see her next morn, when they would try to do some real training.

But Ry-anne did not go to the East Wing. There were two brothers, both suffering a secret pain. Perhaps it was for different reasons, but she knew that Markooth especially needed answers. To that end, she made a detour around to the North Wing and was let in instantly—the Grand obviously knew she was coming. But of course the Grand knew everything, and that was exactly why Ry-anne was there.

EIGHT

Markooth stared in the glass that Indo held. The older man grinned as Markooth rubbed one hand over his stubby hair and felt it scratch. *I didn't know I had such a bony head*, he thought, then noticed that the tattoo was still bleeding. His eyes had teared up from the inscription and his skin was red and swollen around the three black slashes.

"Well?" Indo asked.

Markooth's eyes flickered over the new him. "I think I need a drink."

Indo roared with laughter and put the square of glass down on the store counter. He slapped Markooth on the back. "I know just the place."

It happened to be the village brothel. And it was the last place that Markooth wanted to be right then, given what had happened with Ry-anne that morn. Or what had not happened, thank the Grand. He was still shaken up, and the hot ale that Indo handed him seemed like just the thing.

They took a seat on one of the benches strewn with sequined cushions and gaudy fabric. Markooth's eyes wandered and he struggled not to stare at the village girls, who whispered seductively into men's ears.

A girl walked his way. Markooth looked from side to side, wondering if she was headed for Indo. But no, she came directly at him. She was blonde haired—much older than he. A woman really, although not pretty as Gwyneth was or beautiful as Ry-anne…would be.

The woman stopped before him and he looked up at her full, painted mouth. "Hello," she said.

Markooth glanced at Indo. He shrugged, grinning and drinking in the sites around him. "It's tradition," he said. "Enjoy it."

His heart fluttered as he stared at the woman.

"Want to see more?" she asked him.

"Yes," he breathed. She took his hand and led him away.

"Have fun, lad!" Indo called behind him.

"What's your name?" Markooth asked, when she closed the chamber door. A tiny bed and a square table were the only real furniture. There was no window and no personal decoration.

"Lady," she said. Her smile teased him.

"Lady? Well, that's nice."

She reached for his robe tie and he jumped back. She frowned and then cocked her head to one side. "You got a girl, ain't cha? Or a Pair?"

"A Pair. But she's—she's too young for this yet."

Lady laughed softly. "Why, you're a gentleman. A nice change. You'd better button up so she can't sense what you're up to. Most of 'em aren't happy with the services I offer if you catch me."

"Right." Markooth's mouth had gone dry. "I would never let her feel this."

* * *

A short blond Guard let Ry-anne into the Grand's poky room. Before going in, she tested to see whether Markooth concentrated on her. No, she realized, he blocked her tight. The thought

made her frown and she suppressed a shudder. She would have to ask him about it later. For now, the Grand waited. On this occasion their Ruler stood by the window—it was the first time Ry-anne had seen her out of the chair. Devenich nodded vaguely but otherwise ignored her.

"A touch early for your spell class, I would say." The Grand's voice floated, but she didn't turn around.

"I think you know I'm not here for that," said Ry-anne, trying to maintain steady breaths. Hard, when the pressure of power suffocated her.

Eventually the Grand turned. She pushed off from the window with one hand, letting her fingers trickle over the sill before moving to her chair. Gracefully, she sat and regarded Ry-anne with an expression that said, *So?*

Ry-anne collected her strength. "I want to know what you know."

"For that you must Rise. I believe I still have a few measly Season's left before that happens!"

"You know what I mean." She stabbed a glance at Devenich but he didn't look interested. The Grand shrugged. Ry-anne licked her lips, heart clanging. "Markooth has a right to know about his past."

"True. I told him as much myself." Ry-anne frowned. The Grand elaborated. "I mentioned that there were secrets amongst his Immediates and that he would do well to find them out."

"That's hardly telling him he has a right to know about his past. That's teasing him."

The Grand pursed her lips and the skin creased like thick pastry. She glowered and Ry-anne tottered a little under the weight. "You have some nerve, girl. Coming down here demanding answers off me when you are too cowardly to announce your Allocation to the Family. They have a right to know that, do they not?"

Ry-anne fidgeted. "But it's eating him up my Lady, and I can't help him unless I know. Please tell me."

The Grand chuckled. "No."

"That's it?"

An invisible shove sent her head first into the door. She bounced off and struck the floor in a bewildered heap. Her buttocks ached and the rest of her bones jarred from the shock. The blow was hard enough but the sting of fizzing magic, where the force had been centered, seemed to burn her up. Though scared, Ry-anne nevertheless managed to drag herself to her feet.

"Markooth means a lot to me, O Grand. I want to know what—agh!" Her shoulder struck oak. Reflex mentals meant that this time she managed to cushion the impact. She had surprised herself.

"I won't relent," she warned the Grand, who regarded her with mild amusement. "This… secret, or whatever it is, is ruining his life and he won't let me close enough to help. Please, Great Grand, tell me what it is."

The Grand leaned forward in her chair and spoke low. "I will tell you, Ry-anne. But only when you have earned it. Go into that battle room every day until the memories no longer haunt you. Then I will tell you Markooth's little secret." She seemed to hiss the last word.

There was nothing more to say.

As Ry-anne left, she cast around for Markooth. His presence was larger than before, meaning he had released his block. *What have you been doing? Have you received your tattoo?* she sent. His nervousness surprised her, but the guilt was upsetting.

Nothing. I mean, nothing much. Why do you ask?

She tried to keep the annoyance out of her next projection. *No reason—just that you were*

blocking me.

Well so were you.

Ry-anne sighed and retreated without the usual farewell. Unusually, he did not ask her what the matter was. That fact lay heavily upon her. It was becoming increasingly clear that this 'secret' that Markooth was not even privy to was pushing them further and further apart. Perhaps the only way to bridge that gap was to find it out and then work on whatever problems this new knowledge caused. To do that, Ry-anne would need to fulfill the Grand's behest.

So she returned to the battle room the next morn and the next and all the morns after that. Warm Period was transferring to Hot. Color was just bursting in the flower beds, and the glittering lake had warmed up considerably, so that it no longer made her yell when she first got in. The morns in the battle room soon became a great escape from the blistering heat.

Morn after morn she made one mistake after the other. She got hot and sweaty, bothered and bad-tempered. Lefus goaded her both deliberately and continually—until one day she snapped and reacted on impulse. No thinking or straining. But only when she was that mad could she mental punch him so hard he bled from his nose. When she tried first thing—before he had the chance to get his hooks into her—she barely tapped him. Sometimes she missed altogether.

Occasionally, the memories overwhelmed her and she would lose herself. The shadowy face of the Challenger she fought—would fight—would suddenly sharpen and she could almost make it out. But then the face would blur again and she would be left with a frustrating, dying image. Familiar yes, but wasn't everybody in the House?

One scorching morn, she and Lefus strolled from their meeting place in the statue garden to the south wing where the battle room waited.

"He looks like a beggar," Lefus teased.

"He does not. It is the way they all wear their hair—it's just a symbol of their Path, like their tattoos. Speaking of tattoes, how come you don't have one?"

Lefus grinned. The fierce sun made his jaw-length black hair look wet and shiny. "Who's to say I don't? Perhaps it's just not visible."

"So you do have one then?"

"I'm not sure. Would you look for me, I can't remember?" His fiddled with his robe tie.

Ry-anne gasped and thumped him mentally. He groaned and grabbed his arm. "You deserved that."

"Didn't hurt. Much."

"Oh you're such a child," Ry-anne retorted, both of their sandals clicking on the cool, wooden floors as they entered the south wing. She was glad to get out of the sun, the sweat already drying.

"So says the actual child." It was the most verbal he'd ever been, too bad he could only manage insults. "Up in the air."

"Please," she said.

"Up. Now."

Sulking, Ry-anne shucked off her sandals and padded to the center of the floor. The mats were still there. Grand! When would she ever progress past mats? Taking a deep breath she lifted up and stuck at the usual height, midway between floor and ceiling, proud of her control. Lefus followed suit. To her annoyance, he floated upwards more elegantly than she could ever manage. And he knew it too, she thought, as he gave her a wicked grin.

"Be quiet."

"Yes, I'm such a terrible chatterer, aren't I?" That one was actually funny too, but Ry-anne wasn't about to let him know it. "Now as usual we'll start with the basic set of elementary maneuvers. Tuck roll."

"You'll grow manners some day," she muttered and brought her legs up and strapped her arms over her knees. Her body started to tilt forward. She made ninety degrees steadily enough but failed to compensate for the weight shift and dropped to 180 fast. "By the Grand!"

"Start over."

"No! I can pull it out," she said and gritted her teeth. Every particle of her body screamed as she fought to regain tight control and eventually lifted up to 360 and out of the roll. She extended her legs, careful and controlled, not wanting to make another mistake.

"Nice. You showed good command there. For a move a seven Seasoner could do in their sleep."

"See—hey!"

"Now why don't we try a move that an eight seasoner could do in their slee…concentrate Ry-anne!"

But she plummeted to the mat, halting just in time to prevent a disaster but not quick enough to prevent a fat bruise. She rubbed her rump. "Thanks for not helping," she called up to Lefus.

"You're welcome. Nothing improves concentration when up in the air like a good, bone-breaking fall."

Ry-anne glared death at him but she couldn't stay mad, not when she'd realized this was the first morn she had not been disturbed by the battle room's usual visions. Afterwards she knew she would be able to visit the Grand and find out what troubled Markooth so much. Then she would help him, ease his inner turmoil as only a Pair could do. After that day of her first cycle, things hadn't been the same between them. Markooth had been distant, holding back on lots of things.

After the session, Ry-anne was bursting to bolt over to the North Wing, but she turned to Lefus first. She realized then that he'd only been so antagonizing to keep her mind off the terror in this room. He'd done a good job. "Lefus?"

Dabbing his sweaty face with a towel he raised his eyebrows.

She felt abruptly awkward. "Ah, Markooth and I are going to Pantherea town for a folk jig this eve. You're…" she shrugged. "Well you're welcome to join us. If you want."

Lefus scratched his neck, rearranged his robe. "That's all right. You two have fun."

You two. Lefus never would say 'Pair.' "But that's just it."

"What?"

"I don't think he wants to be alone with me." Ry-anne could feel her face heating up. "It would be good if you came. Really."

Lefus gave a half-smile. Not a grin, but a real smile. Then he turned away and started folding his towel. "Sorry, I'm busy. Besides I'm not much of a dancer."

Ry-anne left quickly, reminding herself never to be nice to him again. And then she found herself at the North wing entrance. It opened before she could knock. Markooth looked confused.

"Apparently the Grand is expecting you," he said.

What's this about? He wondered to himself, but she caught it anyway.

Nothing important. Spell stuff—how are you?

Fine.

Looking forward to the folk jig?

Oh! I'd forgotten. Is that really this eve?

Yes. She thrust the heat of her annoyance his way. *Do you have other plans?*

Well I was going to—that is, no, this eve is fine. It should be fun.

You sound like you're trying to convince yourself.

I've just been busy…

Busy avoiding me?

No! Just busy with the Guards. You're never 'off.' You're always aware, do you understand?

No.

Markooth sighed.

They reached the top stairs and Markooth let her inside. Devenich was there, as always, and the Grand awaited her in the chair. "May I take from your presence that you have mastered the most taxing art of occupying the battle room without fainting? Hm?"

"Yes, my Grand, I have. It was difficult for me."

She inclined her head. Considered. "Well I won't tell you—yet."

"What? Why?" Ry-anne recovered her composure, bowed and tried again. The Grand eyed her coldly. "Would your holiness please elaborate on why she feels it unnecessary to keep to her promise?"

The Grand looked thoughtful. She stroked her chin with one finger. Finally, "No."

"Well—well when will you tell me?"

The Grand cocked her head at a jaunty angle and opened her mouth. Her tongue 'clacked' against her palette. "I believe I will tell you the -" she cupped her hands to her mouth and whispered, "*secret,* when you have mastered a complete, in-air, pike somersault. No judders, no loss of control—nothing. I want it smooth."

Ry-anne wanted to protest that she couldn't even do a tuck roll without dropping. But she stifled her bubbling anger and nodded. She said a polite, "Yes, my Grand," and turned to leave.

"And one other thing."

She stifled the threatening 'What now?' and said instead, "Yes, Great Grand?"

Madrea's eyes flashed with mischief. "I want you to have a secret, too."

Ry-anne dithered. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Then I'll show you."

She screamed as the images assaulted her. As the knowledge blasted her young mind like a reckless thunderbolt. Incantations whispered harsh in her ears. The dead swarmed, rifled through her soul.

It was the cool of the floor seeping through her palms that made her realize she was finally out of the flood of images.

"Oh Grand, oh Grand," she whimpered. "What *was* that?"

The Ruler bent forward in her chair. "The regiments of a spell, my dear. A secret spell, one that will take you out of this world." She gave a strange, mad, girlish giggle. "Learn its laws well, but heed my caution. You must never use it."

"Never?"

A cunning smile slithered onto her lips. "Oh there will come a time, yes. A time when you are ready. And in that moment, it will be your only option." She nodded sagely, all trace of madness gone. "This spell will save your life one day." A motherly expression softened her features—and then dropped frighteningly. "But do not, *do not* give anybody else that advantage. Is that clear, dear?"

The Grand was laughing again, crazy, chuckling bubbles that emanated from a phlegmy

throat. Ry-anne swallowed dryly. “Y- yes my Grand.”

Moments later she left on shaky legs, telling Markooth’s barrage of ‘*what’s the matter?’* to get out of her head.

NINE

The horses' hooves pounded the grass. Ry-anne had Hay, a Gelding from the public stalls and Markooth, of course, rode Grey. They flew out of the House's archway, past the foreboding Fishing Village, through Ricefield and on to Pantherea town.

Markooth pushed Grey hard. Stomach flat against her back and head bent into the wind, he charged ahead of Ry-anne and Hay, a lazy young horse who preferred to snack than stride. Even as trees streamed by, Hay still managed to spot some tasty refreshments and Ry-anne felt him slow. She jarred his sides with her heels and urged him on, determined that Markooth would not win.

"Yah! Yah!" she cried and flicked his reigns. Hay reluctantly responded. He surged forward, neck to neck with Grey. A few huts either side of the path flashed past, marking the beginnings of Pantherea.

Markooth glanced over, then he leaned into Grey even more, concentration etched onto his face. Grey nudged forward. Ry-anne gritted her teeth, hair fluttering behind her like fiery silk. She pushed Hay further, her bottom lifting off the saddle. They sped so fast the fresh air was chill in her lungs. Exhilarating. Cleansing. Perfumed with the scent of night, Markooth's honey spice, the grass and dust.

Pantherea town rushed into view. Flickering dots of torch fire and people grew from toys into full size reality. But Ry-anne was adamant that she would not slow first. Unfortunately, so was Markooth. The entrance to Pantherea's bustling but seedy town was now upon them. If they didn't slow soon there would be damage.

"Hey you! Stop!"

"Are you crazy? You'll kill someone!"

Ry-anne's heart fluttered. Dadum dadum. The horse's hooves thudded over the tightly packed soil. Dadum dadum. It mimicked her own racing heartbeat. People scattered. Hay's rear hoof clipped a basket of groceries and upturned it. Typical. Her horse would be the clumsy one. Lemons tumbled out, stark bitter yellow balls that skidded through the navy night. Ry-anne snatched a look at Markooth. He grinned at her. Stared back ahead.

Her eyes widened. The players were setting up the stage in front of them. Ry-anne had an insane urge to laugh. She swallowed it.

"Markooth!" She looked at him, shouting over the horse's noise.

"What?" Eyes forward, he did not look at her.

"Stop!"

"You stop!" He retorted and threw his head back and laughed.

A mischievous thought winked into Ry-anne's mind. She stretched out mentally and encouraged Grey to slow. But Grey never listened. Markooth Markooth Markooth was all it ever thought. Wait till Markooth says, it thought, fiercely loyal. Blasted creature. Throwing caution to dust she yanked at the tendons in Markooth's forearms, *imagined* that he pulled on Grey's reigns. And then watched him actually do it.

"Hey!" Markooth yelled.

She felt him fighting, but her determination won out. Grey slowed to a canter and an eventual stop. But Ry-anne had no time to savor this victory. The players' cart was going to sting if she hit it. Worse, it would hurt Hay. She used both mental and physical to bring the horse to a

safe but sharp stop that wouldn't strain his muscles. Just in time. Ry-anne stared at the letters on the wagon, painted in an arc: Pantherea Players. They were only half a horse's length away. She cursed under her breath.

All was quiet. A kid giggled. "That girl from the Family nearly died. She's stupid."

"Shhh!"

The players' painted faces—even the men—stared at her, props and masks in their hands. One shook his head. Ry-anne cleared her throat, attempted a winning smile—lost—and straightened up. She sat back on the saddle and steered Hay around. Markooth waited. He looked mighty pleased with himself, one hand resting over the other on the tip of the saddle.

"Be quiet," she said as she trotted Hay past him.

"Well that was fun," Markooth said when he dismounted Grey inside the horse's stalls. Ry-anne tethered Hay next to a black—crow man? no, don't be silly—stallion, a whole head taller than any of the other weedy creatures. It was a ferocious animal. She wondered with a chill who it belonged to.

"Hm?" she said, as Markooth jumped down off Grey. Grand he looked so handsome with his shorn hair and bold Guard tattoo. He patted Grey's flank and led her into the stall next to Hay.

"I said it was fun. We haven't rode together for some time now."

"We've both been busy, I suppose. Do you know whose horse that is?"

"The stallion? Yes I noticed him too—wonderful coat."

A wave of cold air brushed Ry-anne's neck, tickling the tiny hairs. She stood stock still. Her imagination ran wild, and she conjured up a flash of a man in a black hat lurking behind her, his mouth drawn into a hideous grin. Ready to bite. She glanced around sharply. There was nothing there.

"Mm," she murmured.

Markooth busied himself by providing Grey a drink of water from the provided pails. Then he sloshed some into Hay's bucket and tore a handful of straw off one of the bundles and stuffed it into the horses' nose bags.

"Come," he said, "let us go and see the players set up."

Ry-anne patted Hay's rear and walked away. She felt as though the Stallion's eyes followed her the whole while. If she looked back, would it look away quick or stare like a thing possessed? A shudder wriggled down her spine. She did not wish to find out.

Pantherea town had returned to its usual pace in the wake of Ry-anne and Markooth's dramatic entrance. There was always something going on there, which meant that people easily forgot disturbances. Ry-anne and her Pair joined the milling crowd and wandered up towards the players' stage where the bonfire had been during the Festival. Ry-anne still didn't like to think of that night—and the image she'd seen of Markooth and that dumb girl. She hoped she wasn't here this eve, whatever her name was.

Lily.

"Oh. Sorry," Ry-anne said and flushed. "That's the first time you've spoken properly to me with mentals for some time."

He sighed and shrugged.

Markooth, what's wrong? Are you still annoyed with me?

For what? She felt his honest confusion.

For running away on you that morn. I know I should have stayed and listened but you—well it scared me a little.

I know. I'm not annoyed.

So why don't you share things with me anymore? You're always blocking me lately. It hurts.

I'm sorry. Truly. But you do try to keep me out of some things too, you can't deny that.

Amusement rippled out of him.

Like what?

Like Lefus.

Both anger and embarrassment flashed**.** *I have no idea what you're talking about.*

Silence.

Tell me what you're feeling. Tell me what's wrong, Ry-anne encouraged as they strolled down the street.

It's difficult. I really can't find the words to describe it.

Ry-anne stopped and caught his arm, careful only to grab the robe fabric and not brush his skin. She looked into his troubled golden eyes and without breaking the Rules, hovered one hand over the center of his forehead. "Then show me."

Gently, Markooth moved her hand away. He shook his head. "I can't. It's too jumbled. Besides, you're too -"

"Young?"

Markooth shrugged sadly and they walked on.

"I just want you to know that I'm always here," Ry-anne said. *I love you.*

Warmth enveloped her and she delighted in the rare affection. But it was all too brief. They kept on walking to the players' stage, where a sizeable crowd had gathered. One child jumped up and down behind the wall of adults, desperate to see. An adult turned around and spied the innocent child. For a split instant, Ry-anne's heart jolted. She was sure the crow man picked the baby up, smiling that absurdly wide grin, before lowering it into his mouth and swallowing whole. Then Ry-anne blinked and the baby was safe in the arms of an ordinary father.

A dirty snicker seemed to float around her ears and then flit away. She frowned. The night suddenly felt icy under its charade of moist warmth.

"Something's wrong," she said.

"What?"

"Something…"

"Young sir!" A bright village voice interrupted then. The woman, saucily dressed in a shockingly risqué robe that was tied not around her shoulders but under her arms, addressed Markooth.

"Oh hello, ah, Lady." Markooth looked nervous.

A sick feeling gurgled through Ry-anne's stomach.

"So this is the little 'un, eh?" Lady asked, grossly painted lips grinning at Ry-anne.

Markooth squirmed. "Yes, this is Ry-anne. Ry-anne this is, ah, Lady."

"Hallo."

"Well I'll let yers get back to your eve. Come see me soon, young sir." And she winked.

Ry-anne's stomach churned. "Who was that?" she asked when the woman sauntered off, leaving behind a haze of bitter smelling herbs and sickly sweet perfume.

"Nobody really," he lied, but his mind told the truth.

Suddenly the image from that long ago bonfire assaulted her mind. Though she did not want to look, Ry-anne now saw that the woman Markooth had been with was Lady, not Lily. The images left her dizzy and gasping for air.

She paused, swallowed the knot of feelings and tried to be grown up. That was Markooth's business—personal and private—she told herself. He was a Guard, a man old enough to be a father. He needed to do that stuff. But her reasoning didn't stop it from hurting.

Then the realization hit her. The vision she'd had at the bonfire was a premonition, one that had seen forward not just days but Seasons. *Maybe I'm not so useless after all*, she thought. *Perhaps I am gifted and maybe I can follow my Path without destroying Glandor in the process.* Lastly, perhaps it was time to announce it to the Family.

"Ry-anne? Are you unwell?" Markooth asked.

"No, I -"

Just then, lightning cut the sky. Stark and jagged like a dagger. Thunder rumbled low and deep. People looked up and marveled at the strange weather. Then the rain pelted them, hard and freezing. But what really fell was evil. Evil that soaked into everyone.

Markooth felt it too. "Go," he said. Ry-anne was unable to move. Markooth snatched her hand and yanked so hard she thought her arm would rip out of its shoulder socket. "Come on! We've got to get to the horses!"

Again she couldn't move. The townspeople's faces—every one of them—started to smirk. Teeth bared, jagged like the lightning. Everyone began to twist around and look their way. They each grinned grotesque, distorted grins as they shuffled zombie-like. Their eyes were wide and wicked, their intentions malevolent.

Ry-anne! Markooth seemed to yell. But she couldn't hear him well. His face was pure panic. Was the evil getting her? She felt herself lifted, shoved into the horse's stalls. Her heart raced fast. No! She didn't want to go near the Stallion, no! But it was Markooth who held on and he wouldn't let go. The Stallion glared. Brutal and brooding, eyes black amidst the black of his hide. Its feral lips snarled. Ry-anne landed on Hay, Markooth on Grey. She butted the horse's head from being dumped so hard.

The pain jolted her back to real life. What was the Grand doing? She should be getting rid of this thing. But the evil still poured down and Ry-anne noticed that raindrops stood on the spikes of Markooth's hair.

She threw concentrated and closed her eyes. The Stallion's gaze seemed to sear through her closed eyelids. She saw the tether slice in two. Upon opening her eyes she saw that it was so. Markooth had done the same. Together they backed up out of the stalls, twisted the horses around and pelted towards the exit.

The rain numbed the senses. She wiped the evil out of her eyes. Her skin was soaked, crawling with it. Her heart was being burned black. She drove Hay forward towards Grey and stupidly chanced a glance back at the Stallion.

It was gone.

Which meant that the Grand either chased the evil away or that maybe it followed them. Her spine shivered, but she leaned into Hay and implored him through the night. Hooves thudded. They escaped the entrance of the town in a heartbeat. Ry-anne looked back again. Lightning split the black time after time, dangerous and sharp.

The wind roared against her ears, howling like a dying demon. Her hair fluttered like torn ribbons. She urged Hay on, speeding him with mentals and using Grey's flapping tail as a guide. The horses' legs pumped, struck earth time and time again but never slowed. They smelled the evil, too.

And then twelve hooves beat in time.

The Stallion was behind them. Ry-anne tried not to tremble and focused straight ahead.

Just look at Grey. Look at Grey's dappled hindquarters. But the other set of hooves were closing, catching up. She threw all of her strength at Hay and nosed forward.

An icy snake curled around her leg. She yelped. The cold burned! She shook it off. "Get back!" She threw a blow back at the horse and its rider and heard disruption in the rhythm of the closing hooves. But the mentals had used up her own concentration and Hay began to slacken. Fear sobered Ry-anne and she once again urged the horse onwards.

"Ry-anne, come on!" Markooth urged, his voice cracking.

Grand, how far did they have to ride to escape? Would they ever escape? She felt Markooth move her forwards, like a big invisible helping hand. She spurred the horse, bit down and focused, trying to keep herself together. It wasn't fair that Markooth had to pull her weight, too.

They passed through Ricefield. Ahead lay the Fishing Village. Should they really be riding towards that? But Markooth had the lead and beyond the village it looked as though the rain stopped. The House grounds would be safe. Nothing could penetrate those. Could it? *Come on Ry-anne, just a little further*.

They came to a stretch of barren land. The evil still chased them. Relentless. Lightning lashed all around, whipping the night like a criminal. The sky flashed bright, revealing snapshots of Markooth, his teeth clenched. He drove Grey like a mad man. Could the old horse take it for much longer? The fear was debilitating but they *had* to go on.

Keep going. We're nearly there! Markooth encouraged.

Nearly where? Ry-anne wondered. This thing was still pacing their tail—and it crept closer all the time. But she knuckled down and her cold-deadened fingers looked like bones she gripped the reigns so hard. The barren land gave way to shacks and stalls and the huts of the Fishing Village. Beyond the village, to the east somewhere, lay the Green Sea. Ry-anne wanted to cut through as quickly as possible.

We're nearly there, Ry! Nearly!

Nearly WHERE!

Markooth brought the horse to a dead stop, blocking her path.

"Here," he growled, voice husky.

Using her mentals, Ry-anne just avoided a neck breaking collision, not thinking of the evil behind her for a moment. And then, over the roar of breath, she heard hooves slow and clop casually up to her. Terror gripped her, but she had to turn. She craned her neck around—

But there was nothing there. Just a soulless black night.

Lightning still flickered in the distance. What? She spun about in her seat, but Markooth would still not face her.

Markooth? She reached out, but got no response. It terrified her. Very slowly, so slow it was painful, the horse came around. Markooth's head was bowed, swathed and unrecognizable in the deep shadows. Thunder growled, slow and threatening and a sinking feeling spread throughout Ry-anne's body like a disease.

Lightning knifed again, illuminating Markooth's face. She screamed. In the flash of light she had seen a nightmare. Her Pair's handsome face was distorted beyond all recognition. A too-wide sneer spread from ear to ear, revealing a mouthful of razor teeth. His golden eyes were out of reach behind a veil of suffocating shadow.

"No!"

Not her Pair. The crow man couldn't take her Pair, too. Not him as well as Kyna.

The thing that had been Markooth brought Grey towards her. Only now the horse seemed darker than it should. Her breaths came irregular when she realized that it was the very Stallion

they had been fleeing from.

"Welcome back to your nightmare," the voice rumbled. But the lips—stretched till they should rupture—didn't move.

"Leave my Pair alone. You can't have him."

The crow man pressed one hand to his chest and tilted his head back. Laughter rolled out like thunder, seeming to echo all around her. He stopped abruptly, focusing shadowy eyes upon her. "Touching."

The rain flooded down. Ry-anne gasped, spitting out endless water. Her frozen fingers slipped from Hay's reigns and she clutched them tighter. The Stallion maneuvered toward her without urging.

"What do you want?" she cried and shifted back in the saddle—as if that would help. The wet leather squeaked.

The crow man twitched his shoulders. One forefinger went to that gaping grave of a mouth. Just then he raised a finger. "Yes, now I have it. This Dimension. A worthwhile desire, wouldn't you agree?"

Ry-anne trembled—and couldn't help it. Everything she had learned in training had flown out of her head. She gulped and then her breathing resumed, loud even to her own ears. Even louder than the coursing rain which she constantly blinked out of her eyes.

"Well you can't have it," she shouted. But her voice was weak and the wind dragged it away unheard.

The crow man, as if moving underwater, slowly lifted one hand to his ear. "I can't hear you?" he said in a twisted voice.

"I said you can't have it! Now get out of here! You do not belong here!"

Lightning flashed again. The ghastly smile widened and the whitened thin lips split. Blood trickled onto white teeth. Thunder rumbled. The Stallion strode towards her and Ry-anne couldn't remember how to run. Nor how to fight.

"And who will stop me, Ry-anne?" her name was a whisper, slicing her ears and her heart. "Hm? Not you, I think. No, not you. Hah."

Ry-anne's voice wouldn't work. She couldn't concentrate. Couldn't summon a spell or any mental of use. She floundered—she was going to die.

And then the rain turned off…the wind died…and the crow man looked up. He started to scream. The scream ruptured into a squeal that peeled through the night like the wail of a cat bemoaning the loss of its territory. A flicker of lightning, a crash of thunder and the world felt different. Normal again.

Madrea had come. The Great Grand of Glandor. And she had come and cleansed this paradise of an evil plague. Ry-anne's frozen fingers moved to her lips of their own accord. She kissed their icy tips and uttered a blessing before she pressed them close to her heart. A blink and there was Grey, head low, chewing on the wet grass. A discarded figure lay splayed out on the ground, its face in the dirt.

Ry-anne caught her breath and slid off Hay. She stumbled and twisted her ankle, but the pain didn't even register. She had to see. Was Markooth left there? Was he…intact? Was he still him? She staggered towards the form, slipping just as she reached him. The grass soaked the knees of her robe.

Markooth? She ventured. Nothingness. "Oh Grand, no!" The shock was like lightning striking her heart. She couldn't live without his answer, without his silent company always and forever in her mind. Biting down hard on her bottom lip, she pushed at Markooth's shoulder and

he rocked over onto his back. His robe was so sodden that she could see pinkish skin through the fabric.

"Markooth?" His eyes were closed. The Guard tattoo stood out even in the night and she longed to reach out and trace the design, to will him awake with her fingers and hope.

Ry-anne? It came quietly, like a whisper through a storm. But it was there. Grand, it was there. She crumpled to her knees and started to cry.

With Ry-anne's guidance, Markooth slowly came around fully. He opened his eyes to the dawn and the celebrating birds. Golden orbs shone like the sun itself and she basked in their light. Without words she reached and touched his face—physically. He closed his eyes, the curled lashes grazing the top of his cheek. His skin was warm, soft and rough where her fingers met stubble.

I thought I'd lost you, Ry-anne sent gently.

The warmth that rushed from him strengthened her. He wrapped her inside of it and mentally drew her down to his chest. She lay listening to his heart beat and his insides making squelching and gurgling noises as his body went about its business. A miracle.

"I thought deeply this eve. About you, my Immediates- and my Allocation," she said, lip squashed slightly against his robe.

Yes?

She sat up slightly, propped herself up on one elbow and looked into his eyes. "There's lots I need to do."

Markooth smiled. A shot of that insanely wide smile and those wicked teeth stung. But it was not true. Here was Markooth. Her Markooth. He felt right.

"I couldn't bear to lose you," he said suddenly and then shook his head, unable to

say more. She gasped when a mental kiss graced her lips like a feather. So delicate it hurt and left her aching for more. But Markooth shook his head ever so slightly. Then he smiled his kind smile and let her lie back down.

"Do you want me to stand with you when you tell your Immediates?" Markooth asked, after time had drifted by like the baby clouds above.

Ry-anne considered. "No. I think it's something I ought to do alone." She felt him agree and they floated back to sleep for a short time, until the morn blossomed proper and the Hot Period sun roused them back to sticky wakefulness.

They rode back to the House of Glandor in companionable silence and Markooth saw Ry-anne safely to the East Wing. They parted, reassuring each other with mentals. Last eve they had been fortunate. Glandor itself had been fortunate and they both realized that. Whoever was important to anyone doubled in the wake of that nightmare.

Ry-anne peeked inside Gamine's door. She sat uncomfortably on a stool at the table, a hot cup of herbs in her hand. Johann snored on one of the benches.

"Mammy?"

"Ry-anne!" Gamine shrieked and dove for her daughter. The stool suffered and fell back with a clatter.

"What's all this—Ry-anne!" Johann shot up.

Gamine's embrace choked her. "Oh thank the Grand, thank the Grand!"

"Oh Ry-anne," Johann said. He sounded close to weary tears. "We'd made ourselves sick with worry. Mallun and his boys are out in Pantherea searching for you as we speak."

"They are? They didn't see us then—I was with Markooth?"

"Obviously not."

Ry-anne eased out of her mother's grip. She squeezed her hands. Johann hugged her next as Gamine leaned her head out the door and hollered to all that she was safe.

"What happened?" Gamine asked. "How did you escape? The reports are that Pantherea town is wrecked."

"It is—but how is everyone?"

"Most are well—although they are naturally shocked. The town itself," she shook her head, "it's in ruins. Apparently the lightning destroyed it all—some people were hit, too. Tragic."

The news weighed heavy in Ry-anne's stomach.

"Were you there when the tear happened?" Johann asked. "When it got through?"

Ry-anne sighed. Nodding, she dropped onto the bench and wiped her face with her hand. "We took the horses and just fled. It wasn't good. Markooth—it took him over somehow and…his face." She shook her head, emotional at the memory. "But the Grand beat it back. Right back where it belonged."

Johann's face was grave. "Glandor bless the Grand. We owe her your life. 'Tis a great debt."

"Oh Pappy," she hugged him again.

Just then people came barging in. Gwyneth first—she looked a state. Then Jenn and even Helene who held her belly protectively. They needed hugs all round and Ry-anne was made to tell the story over to each one. Lastly, Andee kissed her cheek.

"I'm glad you are well, Ry," he said shyly. And that made her cry.

"Somebody ought to find Mallun and the boys—tell them she's safe!" Andee shouted, disrupting the awkward silence. People nodded deeply, murmured agreement. Ry-anne brushed away the tears.

"What was that?" Mallun's voice boomed around the door. "Oh great Grand! Little Ry-anne! Oh we'd given up hope Gamine—really. Come here."

Ry-anne suffered a great hug from Mallun and a trio of brief squeezes from her halfies.

"Listen everyone!" Ry-anne shouted and readied herself. "There's something I have to tell you all."

All eyes focused on her. A few raised eyebrows. Curious stares. "Go ahead sweetheart," Johann said.

Ry-anne cleared her throat. "Well it's about my Allocation. You see, I'm to train to be the next Grand of Glandor."

Mammy Gamine dropped the mug of herbs. The clay splintered noisily and moist fenner splashed all over the floor. "Great Grand!" she breathed, hand on her heart.

"Exactly!" Quipped Andee.

Ry-anne had to laugh.

TEN

The Grand was worried. She felt the birth of something inside her that would cause her death. But that was not why she worried. Destiny had predicted that many a Season past. No, Madrea worried about the evil. It got harder and harder to protect this Dimension from invasion. Her strength had faded with her health and young Ry-anne was still only thirteen. Worse, Madrea knew that the girl would have to face the Challenge before assuming the seat of Grand a Season earlier than she ought. Glandor help the poor people of this fair land when that child reigned. But then, they all made mistakes.

Lyelle was coming. Devenich looked her way, questioning. Madrea nodded and he went to the door to allow her through.

"Hello sister," Madrea said, which surprised Lyelle.

The Priestess stuffed her hands deeper into the sleeves of her robe and bowed. "Great Grand."

She nodded to Lyelle, vaguely wishing that it was possible to embrace her kin. But that time had long passed. "What can I help you with, good Priestess?"

"The people are in a state of shock, my Grand. Pantherea town is devastated and they—we—we all fear that the evil might return and wreak havoc upon this very House."

The Grand leaned her chin on her fist and thought awhile. She looked up again. "No. Assure the people that the evil has receded and will not trouble us again for some time. Encourage everybody to help rebuild Pantherea—we must not leave them to think they are alone in this."

"People are taking food and supplies as we speak, Grand. When a tragedy strikes it only serves to unite us all further—why, some of the townsfolk are even staying here in the House. You say the evil will not return?"

"Did you hear me utter those words Priestess? No, the evil still lingers. It bides its time. And it will return some day—seasons from now—and I will not be able to stop it."

"Grand? Do I hear you right?"

Madrea realized she had been muttering to herself. She blinked her eyes rapidly and looked directly at Lyelle. "Yes, unfortunately. But you must not tell this to the people. Now go," she waved her out. "I have things to consider."

The Priestess shuffled out and Madrea lapsed into thought. Yet another chapter was closing and in four seasons' time, it would happen. Glandor would be scarred forever, its only defense this naïve little girl who was afraid of mentals and could just about manage a forward roll. But the child had strength, though whether she would find it when it mattered remained to be seen. Madrea mourned for the people of Glandor; the people whose weaknesses and cowardice she knew intimately. Yet Madrea loved them all the more for their flaws and their ultimate essential goodness.

But she could not afford to love the girl. Nor could Ry-anne afford to love.

To be concluded in the November 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

continued from page 31

"Yes, Grand One."

"And I want you to tell this only to the ones who complain to you."

"Of course, Grand One."

Goren drifted forward. Below him, there was no floor, only an endless stretch of mirror-smooth water, or something that appeared to be water smelling of decay. Goren looked down into it carefully. Did something move in there? He eased his throne toward it, turning a portastrobe from his throne down into the mire, gazing intently through the murky fluid. Indeed, something was moving—large, dull, gray worm-like shapes—plump, bubbled convoluting snakes nearly a meter thick and obviously many meters long. These eyeless, purple-veined, smooth tube-things wound their way among white bleached sticks. Goren inclined his head. They weren't sticks. He saw the skull of some creature—not human, turned and twisted and caressed between two of the bloated, gray snakes. Goren saw tiny flickers of energy wherever the skull touched the worms. Meanwhile the surface of the liquid remained static, mirror smooth.

Then Goren saw something else. A woman? A sleek, gray, feminine form glided gracefully among the worms, her long hair beautiful. She turned to look up at him with what turned out to be one of two heads. Her eyes were like pearls—without pupils, her teeth shark-like, grinding and pure white. She herded the great worms away. Goren watched, entranced. The woman thing returned, coiling and turning in and enthralling ballet. He smiled. It leapt up at him with startling power. Goren recoiled. His throne fled in response, jumping upwards. Below him the woman soared high up through the air after him—ten meters; twenty; fifty . . . and then she arched backwards with the perfection of a diver and plunged back down into the liquid again. Where she entered the mire there was no splash—no disturbance of any sort in the surface.

Like a membrane, Goren thought then remembered it from Dualor's implant. The Membrane. Of course—and the two-headed woman-thing must be a Siren. There would be thousands of them roaming about the membrane here on this ship—herding the scavengers for any traces of life force left within the bleak remains of intruders driven into the membrane after things called Pullers had finished with them—whatever they were.

Goren shivered in spite of himself. "Commander," he tranzed after he had regained his composure. "Keep the men away from the water . . . er, the floor . . . or whatever the Gates that stuff is."

"Aye, Sir," the tranzed reply came. Ahead of him, Goren saw two of his Invincibles move quickly upward a few dozen meters, hovering in their battle armor, looking uneasily around them—careful not to touch anything.

Goren moved on ahead, drifting easily past his men. He acted absolutely calm—in control. It was the hardest performance he could remember having to do. When he was past them he swallowed hard, his palms beginning to chill—his mouth dry. Even with the spoilers, the barrage of fear grew like a stab and adrenaline pumped and burned through his massive body. It was nearly paralyzing in its intensity. Still, he persisted.

Soon he saw above him a massive, sculpted double archway overhead. It glowed and pulsated a dim, brown light. Imbedded in row after row of the arch he saw odd-looking figures—sculptures that he could not quite make out. He lifted his throne upward until he saw that the strange figures were not statues at all but were, in fact, humanoid bodies, apparently being stored here. A closer look revealed that while the bodies had two arms and two legs and a head, the head was jarringly out of place: primal, distinctively predatory—reptilian. The face was out of proportion in length with grotesque rows of razor-sharp teeth lining its jaws. Even with its long, opalescent eyes dark in sleep, its expression revealed a cunning, remorseless mind within.

Apparently, these creatures were naked. Their skin looked sometimes like suede and other times like wet silver. There were bio-mechanical devices all over its legs and forearms and, as Goren studied even further, he saw that each creature seemed to be suspended and held in its place by a slowly pulsing spheroid hovering behind it in the wall. This wet globe seemed a mass of living tissue; translucent skin made up of pendulous organs that slowly gesticulated in shuddering tremors from inside it. Ribbed tubes and tentacles roped outward from the "organ," some twisting in the air while others fed into the body of the reptilian warrior.

Warrior! Of course, Goren thought. "Helotoids." These were the legendary, undefeatable master warriors of Echion—each one reported capable of not only conquering an entire continent of some unfortunate world single-handed, but also more than equipped to maintain its conquest against counterattack. How Goren would love to let these things loose to serve him.

The Helotoid before Goren stirred a bit. It was a movement so slight he could not really be sure he had seen it happen, but it was enough to make him jump and raise every screen he had. When he felt his adrenaline finally wasting away, he forced another survey of the Helotoid.

Its eyes glowed a dull red made of thousands of tiny points meshed so close together they seemed an insect's eyes. His heart pounded so hard inside his huge body that little sparkles of light spun at the peripheries of his eyes. He wanted to turn away but took a deep breath and gazed at it unwaveringly. The Helotoid's eyes darkened. So it had *not* been looking at him. Goren wondered if it had even seen him. And then a thought occurred to him. The warrior-thing slept, perhaps in suspended animation. If so, in order to minimize the atrophy, whatever device there was that kept the creature unconscious must also be exercising it, from time to time. To test this theory, Goren would watch it for a while longer. Minutes passed and then he saw some motion from the Helotoid's left clawed hand. It clenched hard into a fist, then relaxed again and there was no further movement.

Goren the Terrible laughed nervously, cursing himself under his breath for being so jumpy. He pulled all but one of his shields and with genuine confidence swooped on down the great interior of the ship with deliberate brashness, performed partially for his men to see.

He traveled deeper into the ship's twisting concourse, gliding low, but safely above the ship's membrane and past several squads of his men. He waved at them as he passed and they saluted, then continued their careful watch.

There was still one mystery of the ship's interior Goren could not reconcile to his RNA implanted memory. What was the significance of the honeycombed lining of the ship? He could almost remember it from the RNA implant, but the exactness escaped direct recollection. Goren knew the honeycombed material was vital to the operation and survival of the ring-shaped Ark of Hurd. But how? What did it do?

Up ahead he saw something. Indefinable, carnage clustered about the ceiling sparkling every now and then. Goren moved beneath this jumble that looked like torn flesh and raw bones clutched within the grasp of glistening, dark tendrils. He glided beneath, looking. From several of the honeycomb chambers, soft metallic tentacles reached out and clung to figures and shapes Goren could not quite discern. He turned a portastrobe on them and revealed the bodies of alien creatures held captive by the slowly pulsing tentacles. A bear-like humanoid hung limp and festering. Its eyes dried up into shells and the head turned back with its mouth opened unnaturally wide. The tongue hung out to the side, dried like leather. Two of the tentacles held the thing securely then imbedded themselves inside the skull through its ears. The bear creature was breathing and with each breath, tiny sparkles of energy coursed along the draining tentacles.

Next to the bear, the tentacles held some sort of wheel-thing tightly against the oozing ceiling. Goren stared at it, discovering that it too was alive — if one could call the awful, obscene fate of the bear *living*. The wheel alien was saturated with dozens of eyes, more densely clustered than a spider's face. Here, the Ark's wet, metallic tentacles pierced several brittle eye sockets, entering the creature that way. The eyes of the wheel thing regarded Goren with blank horror—an unrestrained terror that could find no escape. They watered and a flow of sparkles shot along the feeding tentacles, making them shudder in what seemed ecstatic throbbings.

Goren pulled his gaze away. Now he remembered. Pullers. The honeycombed surface must be burrows for Pullers, bio-engineered life/machines that drew energy from their prey to power the Ark of Hurd. He shivered in hot prickles that such things as Pullers waited for the misstep of any intruder then quickly accelerated his throne down again toward the center of the great hall.

Ahead, the vaulting corridor opened up into a huge, spherical chamber hundreds of meters across. Here, ornate dikes hedged up against the membrane, leaving a scooping bowl of floor made of black marble. Statues made a great ring around the edge of the room and the walls—everywhere on the walls and ceilings fantastic, life-like carvings of gold and silver inlaid with jewels boasted untold wealth garnished with blood from countless words across the galaxy.

"The treasure room of Echion," Goren said softly. He remembered that the statues in a ring, measuring tens of meters high, were images of the gods of darkness and evil from many different worlds. The walls' inlaid carvings depicted every evil act humanity had ever conceived. Goren found himself fascinated by them—even entranced by evil glorified in such explicit representations: all kinds of murder, torture, cruelty, addiction and perversion. And there were, scattered among them, symbols and depictions of every kind of subtle evil and secret selfishness as well.

Long, luxurious couches scattered among raised daises and platforms below him on the floor. Dark-stained pillories, gallows, blocks and altars—stained dark altars adorned the stages while all around the base of the chamber doorways shrouded by sheer, black veils led outward into secluded, dark sanctuaries. This chamber must be not only a place of depravity, carnal abandon and bestial celebration, but also a shrine of instruction in secret, ancient and black oaths, even the Black Arts.

Goren struggled beneath a seething, hungry lusting for all of this. These were the glory and horror of Echion. All these things were proof and worship of absolute power. The treasures here were not only those of the precious metals and stones but also the countless ways power could and had been asserted over Echion's enemies. Here, none could deliver, and life or virtue or dignity could and had been many times stripped away, and often merely to entertain Echion, his generals and admirals, or for the instruction of his armies. And yet beyond that, it was here that Echion had often assured the loyalty of his minions through secret oaths and rituals that were as ancient as the first murder ever done for the gaining of power or wealth.

A towering double door of solid gold encrusted the inside wall of the treasure room. A great bar of silver stretched across it, barring access. Goren smiled with satisfaction. He remembered this. The Ark's bridge and command center for the entire combination of fleets waited beyond. Here was his final destination.

He eased his throne downward until it hovered centimeters above the polished, marble floor and mere meters from the massive, golden doors. He twice verified that the morph projection maintained his appearance in that suave image Dualor's studies had revealed concerning Echion's appearance. Satisfied, Goren took a deep breath, and standing on the step of his throne, he took hold of Jzherillza's amulet. He closed his eyes in dark reverence and carefully

spoke the words he remembered that should open the control center to him.

"Hurd! Kolish Hurd! Eisel vor Vixeb con Baeshel toh Echion! Meeshhkall ton voral tor Echion! Haelschka!"

A loud cracking echoed across the hall then down and around the ring concourse. Air tinged with the smell of blood and something akin to mildew rushed and spattered from beyond the gap in the golden doors while the silver bar glided smoothly out of the way. The doors parted slowly—ponderously before Goren.

"Bring the traitor," he tranzed. "And I want him well bound. He must do nothing to disturb this vessel except I shall cause him to do it."

Goren drifted into the control center, deep and huge—echoing as in some mammoth cathedral. Indistinguishable shapes lurked on the chamber walls and ceiling. The floor was invisible among dark shadows lost in a dank and musty haze. An oversized throne on a sculpted dais waited in silhouette against a dim, gray pulsating glow opposite the entranceway. Goren waited, letting his eyes grow accustomed to the dimness. He peered down at the floor. It looked like a maze with no bottom to it made of old, old…cement? Cement?! That was crumbling? He puzzled. Strange, ribbed tubules snaked down from strange webs spread among the walls and ceiling, coiling in wet glistens across the dusty, cave walls of the labyrinthed floor then running to the throne on the chromium-smooth dais.

A dark, dinosaurian figure slept upright on the throne. Goren could not yet make it out. He was afraid to fire any strobes in here. This was the nerve center for the entire flotilla, and instinctively he felt that things were not completely asleep here. In any event, he wanted to be careful.

His gaze drifted past the webs to the walls and ceilings. In the faint light he could just make out the shapes of what appeared to be control tiers. They ran in circles about the chamber like the stacked balconies of a great arena, and although Goren could not distinctly identify the figures, he found huddled at the seats that each sleeping form looked remotely human—and yet varied widely in structure as across an entire animal kingdom gone wild. It was as though each of these figures here had been put together, *glued* sometimes haphazardly. Here were humans grotesquely twisted into bizarre forms built after all different kinds of creatures and then cruelly strapped or bolted into stark, robotic captivity. Goren returned his attention to the figure seated on the throne.

He could just begin to see it. It looked to be made of lead crystal—a form—a body, perhaps ten meters high. The head looked like a skull made of five teardrops fused into a humanoid face. There were horns protruding outward in a brash collar from behind the skull, like the neck armor of a triceratops. And then Goren saw for sure that the figure seated here was a skeleton—a mere framework, but made equally of machine and bone. It had four arms, each extended outward with a clawed hand resting atop a globe of dark metal. Its rib cage was enormous—hideously over-proportioned for the size and shape of the skeleton and half-filled with bizarre looking neutronics and gravitronics. Neutrinal fibers laced throughout the figure, collecting into bio-mechanical organs and nodes everywhere. Intricate but powerful mechanizations shrouded every joint, endowing it with superior, even irresistible brute strength of its own. The bones of its legs were stocky—thick. They looked well-suited to support extensive, overly defined musculature, and there were nasty, claw-like protuberances all along the bone surfaces. It was an impressive mechano-genetic creature, bio-engineered for tremendous endurance and power. It was impressively fearsome! Even so, for a moment, Goren's tension subsided. This thing here—the Hurd—was apparently dead. It was only the remains of a bio-mechanical creature and

needed living tissue as much as powered machinery in order to function. And all it was now was a mere shell. It must not have survived its passage into the dark sleep. If that were so, then it should be a simple matter to gain control of the Ark and then the Billion Fleets.

"Great One," a voice spoke from behind Goren. He rotated his throne to see that the disloyal Invincible had been brought in. He had been stripped to a loin covering and was not only bound but also gagged. Goren gazed upon him for a moment, then opened a fleet-wide visual and aural tranz feed to view the scene.

"You are a traitor," Goren said evenly. The man struggled, shaking his head wildly. For a moment, it occurred to Goren that this man might simply be a political enemy to the Invincible commander. He seemed to recognize the face as one of the high officers. Well, no matter. *Anyone* of traitorous bend would do, and what better way to assure the loyalty of his commander than to remove anyone who opposed him from his own ranks?

"Yes," Goren said, as if in answer to the man's silent denial. "You *are* a traitor. But even so, you will yet serve the cause." From behind Goren there was the sound of sliding rock and machinery. He turned back to see an altar rising up from the dark maze below him. It was made of the same honeycombed material that lined the walls of the Ark. Metal restraints opened from the slightly domed crest of the altar.

"Place the traitor upon the altar and secure him," Goren said, still watching in fascination.

How had the Ark known? The ship was asleep, but the only way to awaken it to power was through the death of a traitor—preferably a deliberate sacrifice performed here in the command center. It was obvious now. The ship was not completely asleep.

The man struggled as he was placed on his back, his arms and legs fastened down. Goren took a deep breath and stood again. He eased his throne forward until it hovered before the altar. At his approach a priceless, ceremonial dagger appeared beside the traitor. In spite of himself, Goren found himself lusting after the dagger's incredible wealth. The blade was razor sharp pluridium and the handle was fashioned out of a single, star sapphire. After a moment, Goren reached forward with some effort and took the dagger. Suddenly, as if in answer to this act, the honeycombed surface of the altar began to boil with activity. Worming, translucent tentacles wound their way out into the open. Several of them attached themselves gently to the sides of the traitor's head—waiting. The others hovered, aiming at the traitor's mid section. Goren fought a sudden bloat of revulsion, clamping his eyes shut. He opened them again and lifted the dagger.

"So shall perish all that fight against the Dragon of Night," he said loud enough for the traitor and all the troops to hear, and then spoke the ancient, ceremonial words of death.

I I

Sentegor sat quietly in the office of Reepichor, third ranking of the High Chiefs of Mhyrn. The older man regarded this boy with uncertainty and yet, as he studied the youth's face, he saw there much beyond his years, perhaps much beyond the years of many lifetimes. At last he spoke to Sentegor.

"Thank you for coming. I am told that you are not . . . popular following your display, or should I say your claims offered in Council."

"I am unpopular only among the members of the Council. The people are eager for the coming of the Holy Man and the Infidel."

"Yes—well, that is understandable, of course. But I am intrigued by the words you spoke to the Council. Tell me all you can of those you have seen that lead you conclude that they are, indeed, the Holy Man and the Infidel and not, in reality, the False Ones who should also come to ruin us."

Sentegor regarded the third of the High Chiefs of Mhyrn for a time, then quietly answered. "I have learned that I can do nothing of myself to convince. One must come to that knowledge himself."

Reepichor smiled condescendingly. "Well, yes. That is a nice thought. You have yet to answer my question."

"I meant no disrespect. I can answer you nothing more, for I truly told all to the Council. These that I saw, destroyed the very minions of the Dragon of Night by the power of the Golden Death."

"Hmm . . ."

"That is the sign all are to look for, is it not?"

Reepichor nodded slowly. "Of course, so say some of the prophecies. There are those among your order—those more fully schooled—who argue that the prophecies you mention have actually been added to the original texts over the years and are not . . ."

"I am well aware of what they think."

"Yes. Well, after you . . . er, left the Council meeting, I sent reconnaissance missions throughout the entire land surrounding Markeeome. There are, indeed, wreckages of many vessels there—some yet burning—even now, as we speak. That is why I have called you here."

"Now that there is evidence, you believe my story—is that it?"

"There is evidence of a substantial battle in the lands about Markeeome, and I know for a fact that none of our forces were involved or even aware of it. That seems odd. Look, young man, all we ever wanted was substantiation in the first place."

"So why do you not reveal this in full Council?"

Here, Reepichor hesitated. How could this boy understand or even believe the existence of the political intricacies that abounded in the Council? Sentegor was, at best, a naive idealist. Everything was black and white to him. He could afford to have everything so clearly defined. He was not a High Chief struggling to maintain equilibrium among powerful volatile factions.

"There is something else you should know," Sentegor went on when the third High Chief did not answer him. "The False Ones are also here—at least the false Holy Man is here now. He tried to kill me the night I spoke to the Council—after I was expelled. I would not bow down to him, so he tried to destroy me. Only the power of the Creator preserved me to this day."

"Yes, yes—and the false Infidel?"

"Him I have not seen. It may be that he has not yet come to Mhyrn. I tell you all of this so that you will not be deceived when the False Ones present themselves to the Council as the true Holy Man and Infidel, as they are sure to do."

Reepichor stood, walking to the window that overlooked the great temple of Zorl. It was itself as large as a small mountain—a smooth cone edifice of polished pluridium measuring two kilometers in diameter at its base and one and a half kilometers in height. For unknowable millennia even before Procyx, the Temple had stood here—a sealed structure into which no one had ever gained entrance. That its existence had remained a secret even during the terrible days of Federationist imperialism still astounded Reepichor. After all, how do you hide a mountain of pluridium from pluridium miners? And yet it had not been discovered. Perhaps it was because until the miners were driven from RoseStar, the Temple of Zorl had been fully covered in dirt and

vegetation. Maybe *that* had hidden it. It had been through the intense resurgence of Zoralism in the past two decades that the Temple had been revealed, unearthed, polished and restored to its original luster

Now it stood against the sunset—impressive and inspiring. To say that it was an architectural wonder was an embarrassing understatement. To this day the council of Judges argued to the point of absurdity what lay inside the Temple. Since this information was taboo to all but the Most High Noblemen, no one had made any efforts to find out. It would remain a mystery since there were no more of Most High Noblemen to Zorl anywhere left on Mhyrn—at least there had been none until now, if what this fifteen year-old boy said was true. Reepichor turned to face him again.

"So—assuming you are correct, what are you suggesting we do?"

Sentegor looked aside a moment. Was that astonishment Reepichor saw on his face? The High Chief flushed with embarrassment but waited.

"First of all, do not persecute any who follow me. All of that must stop. Second, all our people must beware of the False Ones. They will come and try to take power—be assured of that."

"How will we know them?"

"The True Ones have already fought the armies of the Dragon of Night and destroyed them by the power of the Golden Death. According to prophecy the Golden Death is not to be used by them in battle anymore again until Procyx itself is destroyed by them using the power of the Golden Death through the sacred artifacts. These are the prophecies. Is this not so? Do I lie or fabricate?"

Reepichor shook his head no.

"When the False Ones come, they shall work miracles supposedly beneath the power of the Golden Death, and they will do so before many people. They will, no doubt, even stage a counterfeit battle with "dark forces" of their own making, since they know the prophecies as well as we. Be not deceived by it."

"But suppose those you saw were the False Ones, staging such a charade as you have suggested?"

"Who was there to see it—out in the forbidden lands? I alone witnessed it. Does that sound like something the False Ones would do?"

Reepichor thought on that for a moment. It seemed to make sense. But this boy-of-a-Judge who sat before him—he was only a child—barely into puberty! And, as some of the Judges had suggested, it seemed obvious that he was an ambitious boy. He was well versed and articulate. Might he not be trying to begin his own cult that could rise up and remove all of them from power? That was also a distinct possibility. The third High Chief found himself beginning to retreat from this dangerous child.

"I appreciate your candor," Reepichor said evenly. "I appreciate your coming here at some personal peril, I am told. The evidence for your case is apparent, but unfortunately, by no means conclusive." Now Reepichor spoke in fatherly tones. "I must govern with prudence. You must understand what is at stake."

"I do understand! Better than you, I fear. Beware the False Ones!"

"Exactly. You have put your finger on it. Beware the False Ones, who I fear may just as well be those whom you saw on a dark night in the forbidden lands. By the way, what were *you* doing there? Those lands are taboo!"

"What will it take for you to believe? Must Zorl himself come down and push your face into

it?"

Reepichor almost lost his temper. Instead he smiled. "Yes. That is precisely what it would take. You are but a young Judge with nothing to lose if you are wrong. I am a High Chief, guarding the Temple of Zorl for the true Holy Man and Infidel. I must be certain. Surely you can see that."

Sentegor stood abruptly. "Why do you patronize me? Do you think that because of my youth that I am a fool to be led away by vain imaginations?"

Reepichor held his tongue. The boy gathered his robes about him and, bowing, turned to leave.

"I must ask that you no longer proselytize your views," the third High Chief called after him. The boy stopped and turned, looking back at him. Reepichor implored the boy carefully, as convincingly as he could. "I have not, by any means, dismissed your views and conclusions out of hand. We will watch—very carefully. When the time comes that we know the truth and when it corroborates your story, you may then step forward and receive the recognition you deserve."

"Recognition? Recognition! Is that what you think this is all about? Great Chief, I cannot believe you would think so little . . . Sir—there is so much at stake that I cannot . . . I . . . well, let me invite you to study the third book of the Zorl prophecies—the sixth through eighth verses for my answer. Good evening."

Sentegor left.

Reepichor stood silent for a time, brooding. He struggled within himself. How arrogant of a boy to cite scripture to a High Chief as if he were a prattling toddler who knew nothing!

Still, he challenged him from the third book of the Zorl prophecies. How long had it been since he had taken them down and studied them? He glanced at the books on the far corner of his desk, then turned away, looking out the window at the great Temple again.

Procyx had just risen. It reflected its rich, blue highlight along the full run of the temple's cone making it look like cool, blue-violet metal. The lights of the city were coming on—most of them rose colored, and Reepichor could see the night patrol of KRAS fighters crossing the skies to the west, low and ever watchful.

The lights to his office came on when it had grown dark enough outside, the room's computer sensing that the third High Chief was still present.

At last Reepichor could resist no longer. He turned, pulled the volume of scriptures toward him and opened to the third book of Zorl prophecies, searching for the sixth verse. It read:

> *6. He that shall prepare the way of the Holy Man and the Infidel shall not spare, and truth shall sing in every ear and penetrate every heart.*
> *7. Though Judges and Chiefs may conspire, he* shall *prepare the way, and none will have power to confound him;*
> *8. And he shall stand above all when destructions shall be poured out even upon all the House of Mhyrn.*

Reepichor closed the book carefully. He buzzed for an aide.

"Go after this boy prophet. I want you to bring him into protective custody," he said evenly. "Do not let him escape. Do you understand?"

The aide bowed silently and left. Reepichor felt a dark uneasiness settle over him. Here was a dangerous adversary. It would be best to remove him as soon as possible.

* * *

Sentegor had no illusions about his own safety. He left the meeting with the third High Chief directly. While he did not run out of the palace, he left with as much haste as he could manage without calling attention to himself. Once outside, he went directly for the gates of the city—the gates that faced the forbidden lands that surrounded Markeeome. His purpose was perfectly clear in his mind. He must find the true Holy Man and Infidel and warn them, regardless of risk to himself.

At first he moved quickly down the main thoroughfares of the city, but with each step he felt an increasing sense of urgency underlain by fear. But fear of what? The False Ones? Reepichor? Reepichor! Yes. Something was urging him onward away from the third High Chief. He took a sudden turn down an alley, down past several homes to one his followers he could trust completely. He did not observe the greeting rituals and burst into the house of Petravor.

The large Mhyrnian crate-smith sat with his family at their evening meal. He stood, abruptly angered at the unceremonious intrusion and ready for a brawl, if need be, until he saw that the intruder was Sentegor. He rushed over to the boy and hurried him into a back room while his wife and children watched in amazement.

"What is it?" Petravor asked, a concerned expression fully claiming his broad, oafish features.

"I must leave the city. I fear I am being followed."

"The False Ones?"

"No. Reepichor's security police. Can you help?"

"Of course. Of course. But how can you think of leaving us? We can protect you. Several of us have foreseen this day and we have made plans."

"I thank you for your preparations . . ."

"You don't understand. You *must* stay. We can protect you. You see we have already arranged a meeting for tomorrow morning before dawn. Many influential men will be there. You must speak to them."

Sentegor shook his head. "Dear friend—you must speak for me. Don't be alarmed. You know the prophecies as well as any Judge I know, and you know my testimonial almost better than I do. In any event, the time has come for us to share the responsibility of warning. I must find the True Ones and warn them that the False Ones are here also. I go to find them."

"The road of the gods?" Petravor said after a moment.

"There, you see?" Sentegor smiled, his heart swelling with admiration for the unfailing loyalty of this man. "How many are there that know the prophecy concerning the road of the gods?" Sentegor smiled. "*You* know it—understand it while far too few of the Judges do, and among them I have found most discount it completely. No, you can teach well, my friend.

"Now, I need your cunning. How can you get me out of the city—tonight?"

I I I

Goren's pulse raced through his huge frame. It took considerable self-control to keep from wiping the blood off him. He replaced the wet dagger on the altar, watching with hidden revulsion as the Pullers danced and dragged their feeding, swollen heads all across the body

of the freshly killed traitor. They throbbed and bloated at the influx of power while a moment later the sounds of distant, screeching machinery echoed and buzzed from the walls around him. Goren started at the sight of something moving at his far right. He turned to look.

A Helotoid rose from the dark maze beneath. Its spherical power organ hovered wet and pulsating in the air above it while its tentacles wove and twitched, pouring energy into it. Pullers slurped from it as it rose until it floated in the air slightly above Goren.

Casually, the Helotoid eyes glowed red.

Goren faked a proud look at the thing, which stared back motionless—alert. A low, deep groaning spread outward from the skeletal form of the skeletal Hurd on the throne like a dull, buzzing shockwave. Goren pulled his eyes from the Helotoid to see the four-armed creature bathed in cold, gray light from above. Gurgling sounds mixed with the whining of motors mingled with what sounded like moaning women trapped beneath inexhaustible pain. The crystal, metal, webbed skeleton of the Hurd frothed with a sticky, pink gel. Organs materialized within the ooze, clinging in their places. Skin condensed from it. The joints of the Hurd glowed from within like a bright light shining through the skin of one's fingers. Mechano-genetic structures glowed beneath the new, wet skin with their own shifting illuminations, looking almost like wandering, glowing worms writhing and burrowing beneath the translucent flesh. The Hurd lifted its eyeless head toward Goren, and as he watched, new eyes bubbled up into the sockets like dully-glowing egg-yolks that soon blistered into pupils. They bristled with dancing tiny arcs of dirty light as the skin of the face and lids finally closed around them.

The Hurd was formed. It sat quietly, looking at the desiccated shell of the traitor on the altar before it—regarding it without any readable expression. At last, it opened its flaring jaws to speak.

"What do you want?" it said, its voice settling from a hoarse croak into silver smoothness within the few words of that single question.

"I come to wake you," Goren said, broadcasting a full dose of awe at the Hurd. "What else?" he pretended annoyed at the question.

The Hurd lifted one of its hands to stroke the bumpy, blistered looking skin covering its skulls. For a time it simply regarded Goren. Out of the corner of his eye, Goren could see the Helotoid floating motionless. It was incredibly unnerving. Still, Goren waited. When several minutes passed, he rallied his courage and fired a bolt of emotional displeasure while he spoke. "Well? Speak to me!"

"It is unnecessary to enhance your speech with synthetics," the Hurd answered. Goren swallowed hard and turned them off. "Better," the Hurd shifted, leaning forward, resting his arms on his muscular legs. "Now I ask again, what do you want?"

"Do you not recognize me?"

"Should I?"

"I am the Great Master of the Black Arts—their Author."

"You seem to be the Great Author, yet something lacks. Yes, there is something wanting."

"You do not believe me to be the Great Dragon? How could I have come this far to awaken you if I am not Echion, your master!"

"Indeed. You do know the secrets of the Ark and of the Billion Fleets, but those can be had by others who but serve Echion. I cannot say that I recognize you and so I ask for the last time—and I warn you—I tire of this. If you are not Echion, my Master—what do you want?"

"You freakish dullard!" Goren hissed at him. "I am the Dragon of Night! Has your long sleep muddied your senses as well as your memory? Look upon me!"

There was a low growl from the Helotoid. The Hurd raised its head and squinted at Goren. At last it said, "It may be—as you have said. If it *is* as you have said, then you will surely show yourself to me in your true form. That is the ultimate proof, is it not?"

"What?"

"Have *you* forgotten that I am never to unleash the full power of the Billion Fleets against the Primoids until that hour that you kill a traitor in your true form?"

Goren began to sweat. There was nothing about any of this in Dualor's RNA implant. He thought he *had* killed a traitor in Echion's true form. His mind scrambled across the implant for any hint . . ."

The Hurd looked over at the Helotoid. A moment later its grav-pulse rifle hummed to dangerous life.

"I supercede all orders I gave you then," Goren mustered a powerful annoyance. "Those were strange days. I was fearful of the Primoids . . ."

"What?" The Hurd rose to its feet. It towered over Goren. "What did you say?"

"It doesn't matter," Goren's voice quavered ever so slightly. "I am here, now. I am Echion!"

The Hurd regarded him for a full minute.

"Awaken the Fleets," Goren pushed. "I have come to rule the galaxy, as is my right! I no longer fear the Primoids . . ."

"Fear!" the Hurd roared. "Yes! Then you did say the word *fear*! How is it that the Dragon of Night should fear any so weak and slow as the Primoids?"

"I am Echion," Goren's hand moved carefully to his remote, readying the neural disrupters to fire. "Kneel to me, minion!"

A fierce, clawed finger of the Hurd pointed accusingly at Goren. "You fear the Primoids—they who are but fools, bound by simpering rules and enslaving laws! Their powers lie forever muted beneath the cowardly garb of obedience! The Primoids I know! Echion I know! And *he* never feared them!" the Hurd's voice rose to a terrible, echoing. "Who, then, are you that I should obey you?"

The Hurd leapt suddenly from its throne with four demon hands flailing toward Goren. Goren flinched backward at them, bringing up all his shields. The Hurd's stretched fingers dripped steaming venom. The claws were sharp and skewered like the stingers of angry wasps and their very tips spun and whirled like high speed drill bits.

Goren fired the neural disrupters.

Nothing happened.

The Hurd's claw raked futilely against the first four shields. As its grotesque hands sliced through the energy layers they came out of them scorched, sizzling and arcing. It was then that the Helotoid fired.

The grav beam pierced all seven of Goren's shields as if they weren't even there. The front left console of the throne fell off in a perfect slice that sprayed sparks and hissing smoke. Goren tried to transfer to his flagship.

Nothing.

Another grav beam cut through his throne. This one shaved skin off Goren's leg. He cried out in agony and pushed himself into a pre-programmed, complex, blurring and darting escape—a confusing inertia-free flight of his throne that was programmed to fly him out into the chamber and back down the hallway to the gate of the Ark that connected to his flagship. The Helotoid must have been taken by surprise by this evasive technology, for each, dark, energy-sucking beam slashed past Goren—only past him. Nothing hit him. He increased the speed of his throne

to a blur, his leg bleeding badly out over the air, splattering blood in all directions.

Through his tranz, he heard the sound of horrified, anguished screams—confusion and explosions. He plunged outward into the corridor. Here the grav beams stopped but, he knew, only until the Helotoid caught up to him. Still, there was time—there had to be time for Goren to slow long enough to see what was happening.

His Invincibles were firing their depolarizers uselessly all about as Pullers sprang out of the walls after them. Each plasma impact only strengthened the long, swollen tubule it hit. In the end, each of Goren's men was caught, then coiled inward by an affixing Puller.

The great, vaulting hallway was alive with Pullers. Sirens leapt and danced beneath them, filling the air with screeches and whoops that were both beautiful and terrifying. Goren tried transferring himself again. Again, nothing happened. He turned to look back and saw the Helotoid rounding the entrance into the great chamber that had led into the control center. Goren opened the throne's thrusters. He was yanked back into his seat by the G forces. The auto guidance control was in his right console, and it carried him in a blur toward the gateway to his flagship.

His right console flared in a brilliant flash. He careened into a snarl of Pullers that gorged themselves on the throne's dying energies. The throne's shell blew off and the inertia restraints that held him safely in his seat gave out. Goren spilled outward, down and down. His huge frame crashed through the dark membrane beneath. When he hit, he heard the enraptured screeches of Sirens echoing and re-echoing from down the hallway. He flailed and struggled in the mire like a sinking man in quicksand. Above him, one of his Invincibles hung upside down, his armor cracked open like a flimsy egg shell instead of polarized titanium. The Invincible's eyes bulged in silent panic as a Puller wound and forced its way down his throat. Goren looked around him desperately and saw, floating just out of his grasp, the plate of pluridium he had taken from Dualor. Perhaps *it* had some power that would protect him . . .

Goren the Terrible felt something brush tingling against his bleeding leg. It went suddenly cold. A moment later a huge Siren broke the surface just a meter away, singing wildly, Goren's kicking, severed leg in its mouth. He screamed in terror, trying to grasp at the plate. His squat fingers touched it. The figure in the lower left corner—obese and horned, glowed with a painfully violet brilliance. He swung the plate around at the gloating Siren who covered her eyes at its light and dived down beneath the membrane again. Goren held the plate up toward the following Helotoid. The terrifying creature hesitated just as it was preparing to fire on him. It was working. It was working! Goren laughed wildly. He turned to look around him.

The gate! The gate that led to his flagship stood open to emptiness only a meter away. His flagship was gone!

"Cowards!" he cried, puffing audibly. "Burning, incompetent cowards—I'll see you all at the Gates for this!" He puffed and struggled some more against the membrane, growing dizzy from the effort. "Fool cowards," he cursed in between deep, insufficient breaths. "I'll kill you all for leaving me like this!" He worked and worked in the ooze. Minutes passed, then more and more. He sobbed and cursed in blind fury when his fat hands finally clutched at the lip of the gate.

"Yes! Yes!" he turned back to the Helotoid, laughing just barely between monstrous heaving breaths that did little to stop the throbbing pain in his chest and the swirling, sparkling dizziness of exertion. It took nearly five minutes to pull up into a sitting position on the threshold of the gate.

He held the plate defiantly toward the Helotoid. Nothing more molested him, now. His leg still felt cold. He looked down at it in disbelief. There was no blood. The wound seemed

cauterized, but he had no leg just to above the left knee. “Now, where the Gates are my ships?” He turned, looking desperately out into space for his fleet.

The ships were there—all of them—firing their depolarizer cannons in a steady blur of energy. Goren watched—hoping—waiting for the explosions the cannons should have evoked. But wherever they fired full weapons at the Ark of Hurd, the energies merely awakened a new battery of hungry Pullers. Everywhere, all around Goren, massive, powerful Pullers reeled in vessel after vessel. The screaming he had heard tranzed to him continued in a horrible din and then, finally, it began to subside. Aurally, he deduced what must be happening to each vessel as a Puller entrapped it—the sound of tearing metal, depolarizer rifle discharges, and then only the sickening gurgling of horrified men drowning into sloshing silence.

Goren pulled himself across the wide, expansive surface of the Ark. It never occurred to him to wonder how it was that he could breathe here—where there should only be the vacuum of space. He could only whimper in a defeat born of trauma and shock. He clutched the pluridium plate to him in a blind, desperate faith in its power to preserve him. Then suddenly, he had flash through his mind the image of the Mhyrnian Dualor, shriveled and shrunken in death, holding this very plate of etched metal tightly to his collapsed breast.

Goren dragged his huge frame farther across the Ark. He could not be sure how long he did this, for the vessel was massive and its curvature would not be apparent to any single man, crawling over it. Frequently, he glanced behind him to see the Helotoid hovering only meters away, its bulbous power organ floating above and behind it, throbbing with gluttonous hunger—waiting.

From all around Goren there was the sound of buzzing—angry humming—The Billion Fleets. Goren could still see huge Pullers leaping across hundreds, even thousands of kilometers of space to capture the last of his warships trying desperately to get away. He could see his ships firing their thrusters at full power in a vain attempt at escape. Even their PQI engines could only succeed in igniting into duds.

Ruin! Death! But not for Goren. Why?

The plate! Yes! Yes! The Plate! Somehow, it was saving him, at least for the moment. Goren pulled himself on and on and then he crested the inner edge of the ring-shaped Ark.

The warp! The warp he and his fleets had seen on approach—the warp that lived within the center of the ring shaped Ark of Hurd. It was open to somewhere. Anywhere was better than this. Goren looked down. Below him was jungle. That was all, just jungle. The plate of Dualor now glowed around its edges and the figures of the mountains and stars engraved near the left edge and center of the plate glowed with a pinkish light.

The plate was controlling the warp! That must be it! The plate must have designated a place for the warp to open into—a world, where there must surely be no fleets of Echion—right? A Mhyrnian plate had opened the warp! Goren would be safe in the world below! He pulled himself forward, balancing over the edge. He worked his way up into a sitting position. He could not be sure how high he was above the ground of the jungle beneath. He was well above the trees, to be sure—meters above their tops. Perhaps tens of meters—maybe a hundred meters! Perhaps the fall would kill him. He turned back to see the Helotoid waiting in silence.

Then, turning back, he saw . . . a Mhyrnian? Yes. He saw a tall, powerful-looking Mhyrnian standing in space above him, looking down at him. But this was more than a mere Mhyrnian. This was one of the great ones—the high wizards. He wore a scintillating, red robe—the mantle of a nobleman to the god Zorl. Perhaps this was the one to whom he had lost Jzherillza and hundred ships at Mhyrn. He stared at the Mhyrnian who hovered motionless,

merely gazing back. Yes! It must be Mhyrn below.

Somehow—impossibly, Goren the Terrible pulled himself together. He took several deep breaths, pumping himself up for the fall. Then, shaking his head once, Goren slipped off the Ark of Hurd and fell down into the jungle, still desperately clutching the plate of Dualor in his hand.

The Mhyrnian watched him fall into the trees—heard him scream out in pain as he disappeared into them—heard the sounds of birds and animals set to flight by Goren's noisy, falling hulk.

Silence.

After a time, the Mhyrnian looked up at the Helotoid who, nodding once in obedience, turned and disappeared back inside the Ark.

I V

What Palmer heard wasn't exactly music. It merely affected him the way music did. The enveloping flames sang a rich, smooth fullness—a sustained chord of music played perfectly and effortlessly. It lifted his spirits and wrenched at him with a deep emotion akin to joy and peace. It resonated a radiant, personal power igniting some inner . . . light? Yes. Its golden light filled Palmer to overflowing and he found his eyes moist and his throat thick with its overwhelming emotion of rightness.

The brilliant fire of Palmer's passage fell away behind him as he emerged from the surging of roaring water to find himself surrounded by its mist. He looked down but could not see where his feet touched or even what they touched. He could not even be certain he stood on solid earth. He looked up again, taking more steps forward, and came out into the clear night.

The sky was filled with galaxies. It was as if Palmer stood at the center of a massive super cluster of galaxies that sprinkled their light into the darkness about him. He looked around further and discovered two brilliant pink stars shining with the brightness of the moon some ninety degrees apart and directly overhead. His gaze came downward and he found Gaultor facing him, standing against a silhouette of trees, his face gazing at something up and behind Palmer. The Mhyrnian's face shone as if illuminated by something toward which Gaultor stared.

Palmer had a sudden deja vu. He was back aboard the hoversleds as they circled past Markeeome on their way to RoseStar—that moment that Palmer had first discovered his Seership. Part of the experience included seeing, reflected in Gaultor's face, the flashes of silver energies from Markeeome that no one other than he and Gaultor had been able to see. This was like that. Now, again, Gaultor's face seemed lit as if by some distant and brilliant fire. Palmer turned to see what held Gaultor's attention.

A great city floated among the clouds. It hung in space above the mountains, looking for all as if it had been pulled up from the earth, ground and all and hovered above the world. Its buildings were exquisite. They were as purely beautiful as the structures of RoseStar had been garish and hideous. And standing above the city in the air churned a pillar of golden fire. It's vortex flared in awful, beautiful majesty and the surge of joy and rightness Palmer had felt while walking through the burning waterfall returned, taking his breath away. He could not pull his eyes from it—nor did he want to. Like Gaultor, he stood transfixed at the beauty and power—a power far greater than that of mere fire.

"It is the Great City of many names," an old, thick voice spoke from behind Palmer. He

and Gaultor turned to see a short, elderly man and woman coming out of the dark trees toward them. They were not Mhyrnians and were dressed in simple robes of gray, or perhaps pale beige. Palmer's gaze was drawn to their faces. They seemed almost white in the light from the City and they smiled warmly at them. "It is the city of unity—the city of one mind and one heart—the Great Capitol of power."

Gaultor bowed his head and carefully knelt before them. The woman stopped a ways off while the old man continued toward them. "Come, my friend," the man said kindly. "It is not seemly that you should kneel to us," he put his hand on the Mhyrnian's shoulder. "We are as you—serving the great plan and He who fashioned it."

Gaultor stood again.

"You have come for the great key."

"We have," Gaultor said, not being able to resist turning to look back at the magnificent, floating city behind him again.

"You shall have it. But you have also been brought here for a brief time of rest and healing—and preparation." The woman came forward and took Gaultor by the hands. He turned back to look down at her. For nearly a minute they gazed at each other. It was as if words and ideas flowed silently between them. Gaultor's eyes filled suddenly with tears. The woman smiled and, stepping beside him, put an arm about the Mhyrnian's waist. She was sufficiently short and he tall that her shoulders came to just above his waist. Gently, she led Gaultor off into the trees whence she and the man had come. Palmer watched them go. Ironically, but for their sizes, Gaultor looked for all the world like a child walking off in the full comfort of his mother. Soon they were lost in the darkness of the trees.

"What is this place," Palmer said.

"It is called Serenity." The old man said the name with the slightest inflection of wonder.

Palmer shook his head. "No, sir. We stand here between galaxies. The Serenity worlds lie well within the . . . that is to say within my galaxy . . ." Palmer looked all around him in the sky. "Right now I don't know exactly where that is . . ."

"This is the first Serenity—the Serenity after which the worlds you speak of were named." The old man smiled without reproach. "Here is the single place in our universe where the three kingdoms of humanity join. That is why this Serenity is the true Capitol of this universe."

"Well, yes. That would . . . " Palmer paused for a moment, then spoke the truth. "I'm sorry. I . . . I'm afraid I really don't know what that means."

"I see. But, my friend, all this is not as mysterious as it may seem. You are a seer, are you not?"

"A seer? Oh . . . oh yes. Yes, I guess you could call me that."

"Then you can see for yourself. Turn and look at the city and open your powers of Seership upon it."

Palmer turned and looked up at the City and opened himself to see it.

The sky immediately above and among the trees filled with more and more galaxies, suddenly turning into a great sea. It was as though he drifted beneath its surface, looking up through its crystal-clear depths. Besides galaxies without end, wondrous stars twinkled in third dimension all about him. Glistening sparkles, they shone in pastel hues—pinks, peaches, creams, powder blues, and whites. He could almost reach out and touch them.

The City itself seemed to ride above the surface of this ocean of stars and galaxies. It looked as if star-laden water cascaded from its streets down into the sea. Palmer could almost taste the falling waters. Not salty, they were sweet and cold and clear—the most refreshing

waters he had ever imagined. A great, crescent moon hung over the city, bathing it in its cool, white elegance. Here he knew, somehow, it must be perpetually springtime, for the trees he saw adorning the City were in magnificent bloom. Their exhilarating fragrance came to him across the cool night air—subtle yet exquisite, triggering in him vital memories of home and of Arrleen.

He missed her so much!

His gaze lifted up upon the pillar of fire. It spun dazzlingly upward, opening itself outward into an even higher sea where the very waters themselves burned in a kind of breathtaking glory. The skies of this highest realm were filled with dazzling orbs like suns amid countless shards of luminous, intense rainbows. The trees of this highest sea were perfect—thrilling. They seemed transparent—as if made completely of molten glass, shining with an inner light. Bright, iridescent birds soared through the skies among the rainbows and suns—calling to each other in heart-wrenching songs.

Palmer discerned glowing figures moving up and downward from this high, burning sea of glass along and about the pillar of fire as if it were a spiral staircase. This highest, brilliant kingdom was immediately, irresistibly enthralling, but not merely from its visual beauty. Something about it was so utterly familiar that for the first time in Martin Palmer's memory he felt that he was seeing his true home. Yes! Home! Palmer caught his breath. His eyes, blurred with emotion, surveyed this highest heaven—drinking it in. He could not get enough of it. Without realizing, he reached upward toward it—responding to its potent magnetism. He fell suddenly forward, caught just barely in the arms of the old man.

"You truly are a seer," the old man said after Palmer had regained himself to some degree. "Few there are among us—even those that are natives of Serenity, that can see as deeply as you."

Palmer righted himself with some effort. He deliberately avoided looking up at the City again. The old man held him with ancient but strong arms. Palmer saw his hands holding him up. They were deeply wrinkled but . . . but somehow this evidence of life's decline seemed only an illusion. It was as if these hands gently radiated the stored accumulation of some luminescent, serene power, harvested across years of struggle, sorrow and fulfillment.

"I think you should come and rest, now." The old man said. "Beyond the considerable efforts and sufferings you have endured over the past weeks and months, the Seeing drains considerably from spirit and body. You need much rest."

"But we have to get back! Procyx! Many will die . . ."

"*All* will die if you attempt the destruction unprepared. Now come. Lean on me as you feel the need. My home is not far from here."

Palmer followed. After a few steps he found that he could move on his own, though he had to be careful of his balance. It felt like trying to navigate quickly after having awakened suddenly from a deep sleep. His balance was unreliable.

The night here was wondrous. Palmer enjoyed each fragrance that drifted subtly past him as he and the old man made their way though the darkness. Flickering like golden moonlight, the City behind provided sufficient illumination for them to see.

They finally came to a clearing in the trees. Shimmering arrays of metallic lavender boxes hovered mysteriously in the air just above the ground at the center of the clearing. It was as if many fountains sprayed up into the night in carefully structured patterns. These seemed perfectly contained by invisible forces that shaped the mercuric fluid into floating cubes and rectangles. It was only a moment later that Palmer recognized that what he was looking at was actually a structure of some kind—a building. They went forward toward it and, at their arrival, the constantly flowing rivulets of cool metal opened before them like a receding tide to form a

circular doorway. Palmer followed the old man inside.

The room beyond seemed solid enough. Its walls stood opaque and ordinary. There was no evidence of any of the fluidity outside. It was a modest residence, tastefully furnished with functional, comfortable chairs and tables. On the wall opposite the door was an expansive mural not unlike those Palmer had seen at the Place of Hope back on Mhyrn.

It depicted a great pyramid of crystal that radiated an inner light against a sunset dwindled to dusk. Above it shone twelve brilliant suns, each of a different color, and above these there were three more. Palmer studied the image, more than sensing that it was symbolic, and as he opened his powers of Seership on it he beheld that brilliances were, in fact, massive, powerful and sleek star vessels, remotely similar to the Federation's Dreadnought class star vessels. The ships were obviously made of pluridium. He stared in wonderment at the scene.

Off to Palmer's right, an elderly woman looked up from a writing desk. She put down a glowing stylus she had been using on a thin sheet of pluridium and came forward to warmly embrace the old man as if she had just met a dear friend she hadn't seen for many years. She then pulled back and looked at Palmer. "Welcome, sir. Welcome." She smiled kindly, then turned back to the old man again. "So this is the one." Her eyes sparkled. "The Infidel."

"So I have been told." Palmer laughed a bit nervously. "I'm not sure I like the title."

"Well, of course—not with what that word has come to mean today. I understand you well." The woman came over and took his hand in her firm grasp. "But it is in truth a worthy, shameless title—once you understand its original meaning . . ."

"But not now, mother," the old man said, tugging at Palmer's arm and leading him across the soft floor toward a bedroom.

"Well, yes," she said. "I'm sorry. Please forgive my eagerness."

Palmer could only nod. He found that sleep was beginning to threaten him seriously.

"Would you care to bathe now, or just go to bed?" The old man showed him his room. Its walls were solid, seamless and absolutely plain—no windows, pictures or light fixtures anywhere. There was one door that probably led off to a bath and another that most likely opened to a closet. In the center of the floor was a large, inviting bed. The sheets were turned down, ready for Palmer. He only slightly marveled that though the bed seemed to rest in a pool of light, no source for the light could be seen anywhere. The bed looked softer with each passing moment. Palmer's first instinct was just to fall down on it and sleep, but the more disciplined part of him knew he would rest better after a bath. Yes. How he needed a bath!

"I guess I'd like a bath first," he said.

The old man nodded. "Just beyond that door there, you will find a bath. You may go directly to bed afterward if you wish. Otherwise, feel free to join us for a late supper." He bowed and closed the door behind him."

Palmer released a deep, tired sigh. He went into the bath, and at his approach the water in the tub began flowing. He put his hand beneath the spigot and found it to be the exact temperature he preferred. He laughed once, straightened and disrobed.

He looked at his reflection in the wide mirror over the counter opposite the tub. He had a respectable beard now. He considered removing it for a moment then decided against it. His face was grimy—his hands were red and blistered in a few places from the climb to the Place of Hope. His legs wore bruises as well as his arms in a few places. When the water had filled the tub to a comfortable level, it stopped. Palmer took a wash cloth from the rack on the wall, stepped into the tub, and sat down and back into the water.

It was glorious.

He relaxed here for a time, just soaking in the water. But his mind would not let go—not just yet.

Who was this mysterious old man who seemed to know so much about Palmer and Gaultor? And the city? And this world, out here between the galaxies—alone—solitary. What had the old man called it? The Capitol? No, the *city* was called the Capitol. The world was called Serenity. Perhaps it *was* the original Serenity—but the Capitol? And how could all of this here be linked to the ancient Mhyrnian religion? There *were* links—undeniable links—and the wonders he had seen went far beyond any science the Federation had.

Palmer shifted around in the water. He sat upright, reaching for the soap to begin cleaning himself.

And what about the Mhyrnian religion? Palmer laughed once in astonishment. He, Martin Palmer, was now a Most High Nobleman to the god Zorl! And this honor was immediately both confusing and awesome—confusing to the Federation Colonel part of him and awesome to the—what had Gaultor called him? Seer? Palmer had truly seen things he could neither explain nor deny. Nor did he really want to deny them. He had felt…hope! Hope, for the first time in so long.

How could Palmer be a Seer? Perhaps he was a Mestrate, possessing the ability. He had been tested genetically as a child. The test had been negative. But word was now that the test only looked for the dominant Mestrate gene. Nobody ever talked about recessive possibilities. Perhaps he was a recessive Mestrate and the power of the mountain had, as Gaultor said, awakened those recessive powers to life.

The mountain. Palmer came back to the Mhyrnian religion again. Gaultor had more than demonstrated Mestrate-like abilities in the powers of the Golden Death. Was Gaultor, then, a Mestrate? At first glance it seemed highly unlikely. Geneticists had said there were no links between Mestrates and Mhyrnians. That was what Palmer had learned. It was true that the Mhyrnians had been isolated from galactic commerce and intercourse, but for how long? Forever? Always? There were no records of Mhyrn's sector of space ever having been explored before the rise of the Seventh Federation. And yet, no one really knew if the Mhyrnians were, in fact, a pure race separate from Mestrates or humans. If they were not pure but tied in, in some remote past to the early Mestrates (the descendants of the legendary Varn Mestre), that could well account for their Mestrate-like abilities. Yes, it could well be, regardless of what the geneticists said. It seemed certain there was a distinct link between Mestrate abilities and Mhyrnian powers by the mountain Markeeome's awakening in him Mestrate talents.

Perhaps.

"Most High Nobleman," Palmer said quietly after a time. "What does it mean? The mere bestowal of power—the Golden Death?" He shook his head. He did know that he could not possibly have healed Gaultor before the Mhyrnian had bestowed the power of the Golden Death upon him—that title or right or whatever it was to be a Most High Noblemen. This, it seemed, was no Mestrate ability, for it could be shared—given from one to another. Palmer felt certain that the Golden Death, at least, obtained its strength from some source other than that of Mestrate lineage—and the Golden Death was a very real power. With it, Gaultor had destroyed fleets of state-of-the-art warships. He had healed Lenore Aramus and freed Frank Cosgrove and himself from the awful mind grip of the outlaw combine witch.

Witch? Why had he thought of her that way? But the term *witch* seemed absolutely correct. It felt correct.

Mysteries.

And yet, somehow, Palmer did not feel anxious—he did not need to know all the answers

right now, did he? Really? Here, however strange it seemed, might be a kind of crazy, possible solution to the Procyx terror. The best of Federation science could do nothing to destroy Procyx—nothing! But Mhyrn—perhaps Mhyrn could.

In the face of three centuries of tragedy there could finally be an end—and might he, Martin Palmer, be a part of it? He could not explain the confidence that burned within him at the thought, but he knew he would see it*! He would see the end of Procyx!*

He dunked his head in the water, lathering it with the soap and then rinsing it. He pulled himself up from the tub and took the large towel hanging beside it. Soon his body was dry and he worked at his hair. When he pulled the towel away he found a comb on the counter. He was sure it hadn't been there before, but he unquestioningly picked it up and combed his hair. Then, looking into the bedroom, he saw underwear and a large caftan laid across the bed. Palmer put on the underwear and then the caftan and, combing his hair once more, he went to the door that led to the rest of the house and opened it.

The old man, placing bowls of food on a table in an adjoining dining room, looked up and smiled. "I thought you might be hungry. Come on, Mother," he called. "The Infidel has come to eat."

Palmer came in and sat in the chair the old man gestured for him. The elderly woman came in from deeper in the house and took a seat beside Palmer at the table. The old man sat opposite him.

"We have fruit and bread and milk," he said to Palmer. "A *light* meal before bed is best, don't you agree?"

"Thank you, yes," Palmer took the food offered him and managed, just barely, to avoid tearing into it voraciously. Manners, he thought. The old couple took their food more slowly and with deliberate, measured savoring.

"I will tell you of the old meaning of Infidel," the woman said after a bite of bread and sip of milk. "Today it means one of no faith—an enemy to the faith, does it not?"

Palmer's mouth was full. He nodded.

"The farther back you go, the less that meaning applies. The *faithless* stems from 'one who is a stranger' and *stranger* from 'one of a different land' and back further, it means 'one from a different world.' *That* was the meaning of infidel when the prophecy was given. I will recite it in today's words:

"'The holy man and the offworlder;
"'From the skies they shall come;
"'And minions of the Dragon slay;
"'Lest Procyx destroy us all.'"

"That's not a precise translation, Mother," the old man said.

"It's close enough, isn't it?"

The old man nodded.

"Everything has to be precise with you, doesn't it?"

The old man smiled.

"So, how do you feel about the title Infidel now?"

Palmer smiled, swallowed his food and said, "I know *you* know what it means. But what about everybody else?"

The old man and woman laughed at that.

They ate for a time in silence.

"I am Martin Palmer," Palmer said finally. "I do not believe I know your names."

The couple looked at one another for a moment. The old woman took a sip of her milk and said. "We have a lot of names."

"Yes," the old man put his bowl aside, empty. "Many names. Would you feel comfortable calling me Methuselah and my wife, here, Sarah?"

"I . . . well, certainly." Palmer could not help but wince a bit, feeling that all this was, somehow, evasive. What was the problem, here? All he wanted to know was their names. Many names? The more he thought about it the more evasive it truly seemed. And then he remembered something. Perhaps this bearing of many names and choosing the one you wished to use to suit a particular situation—which was what seemed to be going on—was the custom. After all, the name of the god of the Mhyrnian's was never to be spoken because it was too holy. He was to be referred to through the name of one of his servants. That was what Gaultor had told him back in the underground road that led to RoseStar. Maybe some form of that custom applied here as well. The possibility that that might be the extent of this business made him feel easy enough to put his concerns aside. "Yes. I am pleased to know you as Methuselah and Sarah." He smiled back at them, finishing some fruit. His plate was empty.

"Care for more, Martin?" Sarah said pleasantly.

"Thank you, no. I believe I will retire, now—if you will excuse me," Palmer stood. They both arose with him, walking with him to his room.

"May I give you a gift to accompany your sleep?" Sarah asked as they reached the door.

"Why, yes. Thank you." Palmer shrugged pleasantly. Methuselah smiled, turned and walked back toward the dining room. Sarah stood silently at the threshold of Palmer's room, her eyes closed.

Palmer felt a breeze from the far wall of his room. He turned to look and gasped. The walls of his room were gone. His bed and furniture stood in the middle of a small clearing surrounded by massive, towering trees whose trunks were tens of meters in diameter—most of them larger than an average, modest house. There were windows hewn from the trunks of the greater trees, and these glowed with a warm, inviting amber glow. In the dark, midnight sky above there hung twin golden moons.

"Merrisense? Bronzewash," he whispered. The sweet, spicy scent of the great woods wafted past Palmer's nostrils. His eyes suddenly burned with emotion.

Yes. Home. Palmer was home!

"Beruna!" he said wondering, stepping farther into the scene. He turned back to see the doorways to the rest of the house and the bath standing as mere frameworks against the vision of his home world. Sarah stood at the threshold, smiling warmly. Then, without another word, she quietly closed the door.

Palmer went to his bed and climbed in. The fragrant breeze rustled quietly through pines and aspens about him. The stars overhead were old friends. The moons cast their familiar pale, gold over Palmer's bed. He watched the stars twinkling effortlessly above, and before he could perceive its approach, sleep softly overtook him.

* * *

Palmer awoke more rested than he had been for years, or so it felt. The walls had returned, dim and quiet—perfect for an extended sleep. He yawned, stretching a few times before

climbing out of bed. In response, the ceiling glowed upward toward an optimistic brightness. Palmer took care of his needs in the bathroom, and when he returned to his room, there was what looked like a federation uniform laid carefully across the bed. On closer examination it proved to be a uniform unlike any he had seen before. Its colors were neutral grays with none of the blue and white accents he had worn for so many years. He picked it up and looked at it. A Colonel's rank decorated the collar lapels and mounted next to each of them was a small, red triangle. His other uniform, pummeled, torn, scorched and water-damaged was nowhere to be found. Just as well. Palmer removed the caftan and donned the gray uniform. It was a perfect fit. The material was so lightweight and pliable that it felt virtually non-existent. He discovered new boots as well and he put these on, too. He made a final stop in the bath, combing his hair before he went on into the living room of Methuselah's home.

The old man was just coming in from outside carrying a large, wooden bowl of vegetables. Palmer saw that he now also wore a uniform just like his. The old man smiled upon seeing Palmer. "Sleep well?"

"Excellently," Palmer tried not to stare at the uniform—at the rank on it. "Thank you," he said. He was close enough now to see the emblems. There were only three red triangles on the lapels, no rank, just the triangles. He straightened up. If Methuselah had noticed him staring he made no sign of it."

"It's nearing dusk outside. We . . ."

"Dusk?" Palmer looked past the old man to see that it was late afternoon outside. "How long have I been asleep?"

"About eighteen, maybe nineteen hours."

"That long? I'm sorry, I . . ."

"Do not concern yourself. I expected as much. Feeling rested?"

"Yes, sir. Er, where's . . . Sarah?"

"She's away. How about some food?"

"Great!"

"Come, sit down."

They ate a warm, savory stew with bread. Palmer found himself extremely hungry, and Methuselah encouraged him to have as many helpings as he liked. Palmer wondered about the emblems on the old man's uniform.

Triangles? Red triangles. Palmer wore one, along side his colonel's leaves. Methuselah wore no Federation rank but only the three triangles. Did that make him a superior officer? Palmer did not notice the fourth or fifth bowl of stew. How should he act around this man? When at last they were done, Methuselah stood and gestured toward the doorway and they went outside.

When they were outside, the first thing Palmer did was to try to find the City in the sky again. He stopped, turning all around and then saw it, hovering above the high mountains to the east. In the daylight, there was no pillar of fire standing above it, but one of cloud-white smoke. It seemed more to churn upon itself rather than spread ever outward as the smoke plume from a normal fire would do.

"Do you wonder about our uniforms?" Methuselah said, pulling Palmer's thoughts back.

Palmer nodded. "They seem similar to Federation design, but I don't recall ever having seen this branch of the service before."

"No, I suppose not," Methuselah motioned for Palmer to walk on with him down a path of the mountain toward lower ground. "Anything beyond the absence of service color seem strange

to you?"

"Well, yes. The red triangles."

They left the clearing of trees that cupped Methuselah's house. Palmer glanced back at it, watching its lavender shimmering with fascination for a moment. The old man waited for him then spoke again. "Is there a significance to a red triangle in your military?"

"There is," Palmer replied. "Galactic crisis. The red triangle is the symbol for the highest level of crisis."

"Yes," Methuselah nodded, pleased, as they walked a smooth pathway among the trees. All Palmer could see about him now was the forest. "Have you ever seen any vessels from your fleets wearing a red triangle?"

Palmer brooded over that for a time. Finally, he shook his head.

"Are there any vessels you might expect to see wearing the red triangle?"

"I've heard of planetary war fortresses. I suppose they might wear them."

"Yes. That would seem likely, but they do not. Are there any other vessels? Do not limit yourself."

What did *that* mean? Why this guessing game? Palmer took a deep breath and thought along. He shook his head after a while and blurted out "Vanguards?"

Methuselah smiled

"No," Palmer stopped, turning to him fully. "Not the Vanguards. They're just myths."

"Hardly myths," Methuselah replied. "They are powerful in a mythological sense, yes—hidden from the common view, yes. But real—actual! Not myths."

"I . . ."

"There are twelve regular service Vanguards and three specialized command Vanguards that . . . how should I say this . . . *govern* the others."

Palmer could see a break in the trees ahead. The forest seemed to be coming to an end. Methuselah continued.

"These command Vanguards are called *The Lost Masters*. They are usually hidden even from the twelve until the season when the special power of a particular Master is required. Then that Master gathers all together to accomplish the task.

"The mission of one of these command Vanguards is to stand against all the evils of the Black Arts. It shall be the inheritance of the Warriors of Light in eons yet to come. That Vanguard is called *Procyon*.

"The second of the Lost Masters is truly the *Father* ship of all. It is called *Gabriel* and is based here at Serenity."

The forest fell away. Down in the midst of a spacious city of breath-taking white structures stood an enormous pyramid constructed of some solid, transparent crystal. It was the pyramid of the mural Palmer had seen in Methuselah's home! Hovering in the air above the pyramid was a huge starship—massive and beautiful. It flashed dazzling reflections in the rays of orange from the setting sun.

"There is the Gabriel now—the High Vanguard. It is there that you shall learn how to fly a Vanguard for yourself, so that you may lift the third of the lost Masters—the Vanguard Zorl in its long awaited assault upon the End Star of Grief. For it shall be through the Vanguards, under the true power of the Creator, that destruction shall finally come upon the Eye of the Procyx."

Chapter Four
The Great Key

I

Sentegor lay completely still within the carefully modified crate, trying desperately to keep his breathing silent. He struggled beneath a wave of claustrophobia that threatened to push him into hyperventilation. *Don't just take in breaths*, he scolded himself inwardly. *You can't just keep sucking in air! You can only hold so much!* He felt dizzy. Let it out—easy. Pace your breathing!

This wasn't going well at all. He knew that Petravor had been detained by Reepichor's security police, who were apparently stopping everyone with more than their usual share of bureaucratic muscle flexing. No, this wasn't going well at all. It didn't feel right! He should never have allowed himself to be talked into this! He should not have endangered Petravor and the others this way.

Sentegor clenched his eyes shut so tightly in self-recrimination that they hurt. If he had just headed straight out of the city without stopping he could have gotten away cleanly. Now the net to capture him was well set. Now it would be next to impossible to escape. But he couldn't just go. Those that followed him—those that believed his words—they had to know why he was away from them. They had to know that he was away on duty and that he hadn't been killed or captured or worse—given up. They had to know that, didn't they? The quest must continue! The truth had to be spread, no matter what happened to him. People had to know that the Holy Man and the Infidel would soon come, as well as guard against the False Ones. It was vital to their safety—vital even to their very lives!

There was a sudden jar and then the sounds of prying from without. Sentegor stiffened, holding his breath. He heard the sound of lid of the crate tossed carelessly onto the ground and the beginnings of rummaging inside and around the edges of the false compartment above him. Suddenly he heard Petravor let out with a cursing flow of obscenities that all but burned the tender ears of a boy who had grown up sheltered beneath the service of his god. The rummaging stopped as the cursings went on and on. Now, Sentegor found himself smiling. Petravor had turned from all such vulgarities when he had accepted and believed on Sentegor's words, but at this crucial, dangerous moment the vile habit was working well to distract the police who, Sentegor suspected, must themselves be blushing. A moment later he heard the lid picked up and hastily replaced. Petravor continued his tirade unabated as Sentegor heard what sounded like his huge friend moving about the crate, resealing the lid. There was nothing more from any policeman and moments later, Sentegor felt the crate picked up and the journey beyond the city walls resumed. Sentegor offered a silent prayer of thanksgiving.

He could not be sure how much time passed. He felt the motion of the crate jostling him. He was beginning to feel sore at his elbows and knees and his muscles ached for a change of position. But he did not dare move.

Sentegor listened carefully for the sounds of the city. There was nothing to hear, now—no street vendors or KRAS patrols flying overhead; there was neither traffic nor fountains—nothing. There was only the sound of his own breathing and the false cargo shifting around above him as

the crate was carried on and on. Sentegor began, at last, to relax a bit when almost immediately he felt the crate laid carefully to rest. A few silent moments passed followed by the sound of the lid being opened, the bogus cargo removed, and finally the snap of the hidden releases to the lid to his compartment. Sunlight streamed in. Thick, callused hands reached inside to pull him out.

"We are safe now," Petravor's husky voice cut through the glare. Sentegor squinted up at his friend who clapped him squarely on the back. "I have brought you to the road of the gods. Here, even by law, you are safe. I have found this out through Forbezor. He knows the laws. Pilgrims upon the road are not to be molested—even by the police of the High Chiefs. Of all the men I know, you are surely a pilgrim, my friend!"

Sentegor's eyes began to adjust, now. He saw Petravor looking around him. The Outer City of Zorl with its massive temple lay beyond many trees behind them. Sentegor could see distant patrols of KRAS fighters passing dutifully above the great temple—watching—guarding.

"Still," Petravor said after a moment. "It would not hurt for me to accompany you." He lifted a heavy-duty depolarizer rifle into view and switched it on. "We will meet others farther along the road. It will not be an easy thing to take you."

Sentegor fought a thickening of gratitude in his throat, then, nodding once began walking. Petravor, watching the way of the boy prophet with unswerving alertness, followed Sentegor up the road of the gods, into the jungles toward Markeeome.

I I

Goren felt himself coming up as from some dark abyss. His last recollection was one of searing pain as he struck the forest floor on his back after having been badly skewered on branches and limbs in his fall from the Ark of Hurd. Now, there was only a kind of buzzing softness and the smell of fresh life—a salty, fleshy smell mixed with odor of cut grass. He tried to take a breath but found he could not. There were no sensations of the filling of his lungs. He fought panic for a moment, struggling to open his eyes.

Terror gripped him. Hanging all about him in an eerie, green-lit semi-darkness were Mhyrnians, held inescapably by throbbing, glowing Pullers. The partly shriveled captives stared into space, entranced—dulled while sparkles of brilliance flowed from them, along the Pullers and back into shadows. And there was something else. Small, fluttering shapes swarmed over the trapped Mhyrnians. Goren stared in horror. Spiders? His eyes followed one in grotesque fascination. As he watched, the spidery shape seemed to melt and change before him amid tiny flashes of color. Now the thing was a wet, black reptile. It paused for a moment, flashed a few times, grew wings and leapt off the Mhyrnian into the darkness.

Goren struggled wildly to escape, a gurgling cry trying to escape him, but he could make no sound. He could not move—he could feel nothing. A sickening, head-over-heels vertigo overwhelmed him. It was as though he floated in space, and then a terrible thought struck him. Was this what it was like to be held captive by a Puller? He moved his eyes around frantically trying to see it one of the disgusting, bloated worms had wrapped itself around him. As his gaze wandered up toward his forehead he saw the Helotoid. His brain tried to lunge him away but his body did nothing. He clamped his eyes shut, sobbing in terror without a trace of sound or motion or even tears. He opened his eyes again, sure that the Helotoid was moving on him. Instead, a tall, handsome man appeared from his left.

The powerful, muscular figure stood ominously over Goren. From somewhere beyond, a rich radiance of green light pulsated among various shades and hues illuminating a backdrop of scurrying, sparking, dark life scrambling across the shriveling, Mhyrnian bodies. The man held glowing tubes of dazzling green that he lifted casually away from Goren's head then suddenly he smiled cheerfully down at him.

"Have I lost my touch? I have not," he said putting the tubes away out of sight. "Another masterpiece of life, I have made." He looked skyward. "There you see? A master of life—am I not?" His hand stretched outward toward the green brilliance with the flowing grace of a master of dance. "Should not this treasure belong to me? Were we not right to take it? Have we not proven our ways yet again?" And then the tone of his voice thickened. He yet stared upward. Who was he talking to? The Mhyrnians?

"Who are You to decide such things, anyway? There are many others who follow you, gifted such as I and yet you deny them the treasures!! Well, I shall *never* be denied, for you shall never gain back the treasure." He laughed now—a high-pitched laugh that darkened his face red with its ranting jeering and intensity. "Look, here!" his hand swept downward in a boasting gesture pointing out Goren. "Look here, you fool of a God! Look at what I have made and try—just try to take back the treasure I have earned the right to keep—my treasure!"

The whole demeanor of this man was riddled with overdone, hysterical boastings. Goren closed his eyes, trying to gather himself. Suddenly, he felt a sharp, stinging blow on his face. He started, opening his eyes.

"Do not go to sleep on me," the man hissed at him. Goren tried to speak but still could not. The man frowned and then, rolling his eyes in impatience yanked one of the glowing tubules and worked it about Goren's throat. "Now speak. Say anything."

"I . . ." Goren hated the sound of his voice. It was grotesque. The man smirked and worked some more on his throat.

"Keep talking! How can I adjust your voice if I can't hear it? Count for me, if you are so shocked as to be at a loss for things to say." He smiled. "Now wouldn't that be a marvel! Never has Goren the Terrible ever been at a loss for words. Speak!"

Goren obeyed. As he counted aloud he heard his voice stretched all over the audible range of hearing and then, after a time, it began to approach what sounded normal to him.

"That is good enough—a bit deeper—richer. I have improved, don't you agree," the man said at last, flinging the glowing tube aside with as little care as if it were a broken branch he had just stumbled over.

"Now—do you know who I am—where you are?"

Goren tried to shake his head.

"For Gate's sake just talk! I'm no fool! I won't animate you until I am good and ready."

"I . . . where am I?"

The man looked up and smiled. "You do not know?"

"Mhyrn?"

"Oh, how marvelous! Yes, yes, yes! Mhyrn, Mhyrn, Mhyrn. I have saved you from dying. Don't you believe you owe me something for that?"

"I . . ."

"Besides and after all, you *did* call for me. Oh yes. Didn't you? Yes, you called. I distinctly heard you call. I was a little busy at the time. If you had had the slightest degree of patience, I would have come and saved you from your foolishness, and even now you might command your fleets—under me, of course. You *did* call me—and I would have come. You called for Ramm, too,

but she's too far away and deeply committed to her own designs even to care about the likes of you!

"But I care. You see, even without your silly fleets we can rule the galaxy—the galaxy and, of course, much more—for as long a time as we can dupe the naive, superstitious Mhyrnians. If we work together, we can keep Procyx going on and on for a long, long time—until the day my designs are finally proven. Oh, my fat little Infidel of a scurvy toad, you truly couldn't have dropped in at a better time!" The man laughed throatily. "I made a pun. Not so?"

Goren made a sighing sound without actually sighing. It was unnerving.

"Look at me you idiot, and see what I'm talking about!"

As Goren turned to look, the man melted and shifted before his eyes, suddenly becoming an incredibly handsome Mhyrnian. He was dressed in an iridescent robe of red.

"A Most High Nobleman . . ." Goren said, but the man cut him off.

"No, stupid—not just *a* most high nobleman—*THE* most high nobleman! See? Here is the plan. With you along as The Infidel, I, the Holy Man of the EndStar of Grief prophecies, shall fulfill all and finally—*finally* rule Mhyrn and all its hidden secrets. Once in power, I shall be able to hold off the day of Procyx's destruction until a time when my Master is freed at last from his prison by the ruinous, irresistible powers of Hypermotility. Then—then he, himself, can awaken the billion fleets and bring them here . . ."

"Yes," Goren said in his strange, new voice. "He was imprisoned . . ."

"Somewhere. Yes, somewhere I know not. But it must be a powerful prison that holds my Master for so many, many, long eons. And yet nothing in this universe can stand against Hypermotility! Nothing! Not so? It will tear everything apart eventually!"

"Well," Goren corrected. "I found a way . . ."

The man laughed humorlessly. "I know of your vulgar method. The day would have come when the power of Procyx would have worn it to nothingness and then your fleet would have crumbled into atoms!

"But see here—here is the brilliance of my plan! You were worried that should the Billion Fleets be loosed the Warriors of Light would come to defeat them?"

"It was Dualor who feared such a thing." Goren answered. The sound of his new voice still unnerved him.

"Ah yes. That misguided Mhyrnian Judge you hired—and then destroyed. Another bad decision on your part. You should not be left in charge—you make far too many rash choices. You can never afford to ignore the old legends—NEVER. They must never be ignored. But I digress.

"The old Mhyrnian may well have been right to fear such a thing as the wakening of the Warriors of Light. While I do not believe the Warriors, themselves, capable of anything more than mild irritation to the Billion Fleets, I have found that it is always best to be prudent. According to legend, the danger the Warriors of Light pose us comes when they achieve combination with the full power of the Mestrates. They must be prevented from fulfilling *that* mission at any cost." The man threw his hands in the air in an exaggerated, almost wild gesture of boasting elation. "But then all of this has turned out to be an empty fear, in any event."

"Empty fear? I don't follow . . . tell me more of these Warriors of Light?"

"Do you have nothing in the RNA implant the Mhyrnian provided?"

Goren tried to remember. Mysteriously, there was little more than what Dualor had said to him back on the flagship. "I don't know many specifics."

"You must have angered the Mhyrnian beyond whatever fear he had of you for him to withhold such things from you. Or, perhaps he turned to the Light at the last moments of his life.

Traitor!" He spat on the floor, then turned to watch something where he spat, smiled, then went on.

"Yes, all right. I'll tell you. The Warriors of Light are the elite champions of the founding Mestrate Primoids—they who should come to fight against us were Echion to be freed."

The man sighed and smiled broadly.

" . . . And they are not yet alive." He laughed here. "This I know through The Treasure of Life that I possess!" He gestured toward the green brilliance again. Goren again tried to see the source of the radiance but could not. The man continued. "Ah, mine is a cunning, glorious plan that will work. It is not flawed. I have considered it for centuries. It will work!

"Look, my paralyzed, corpulent rodent—if we do this right, ultimately we will be able to conquer the galaxy in a single night, as my Master has vowed. Once that is done, it will then be a simple matter to gather up and murder all the possible progenitors of the Warriors of Light and thus assure ourselves absolute and unending power—forever."

"Korday!" Goren said with sudden recognition. "You are Korday!"

"At last understanding dawns!" His voice hissed with power, now. "Yes, I am Korday—Cluster Lieutenant to the Most Dark Echion! It is I who am master of the Treasure of Life!"

"Yes! You! It was you I saw floating above the Ark of Hurd!"

Korday smiled. "I saved your life, you know. You owe me allegiance—you swore me allegiance if I would fulfill your desires. This I shall do, so you must obey me. Not so?"

Goren tried to swallow but he felt nothing to swallow with. Korday laughed. "You are quite a different creature from what you were, you are." He straightened, proudly. "I have made you powerful—through machines of the black arts and unequaled feats of genetic engineering! Powerful!" He raised his fist, clenched hard. "Now, *truly* powerful!

"All the laughable, archaic gadgets you had in your throne! They were nothing—tin toys! Here—now—I have given you real power—and it *all* resides within your great, fat body." Korday chuckled through his nose. "Amazing how much I can install in such a huge frame!" His voice grew syrupy with self-satisfaction. "Be proud! You are invincible—invincible from all but me, of course. Oh don't be so crestfallen. It must be so. You see, I don't really believe in honesty among thieves. That sort of thing is a myth. It always fails in the end. But—be proud, nevertheless! Rejoice! None can destroy you now. Not even the impotent Primoid power of the Golden Death can harm you! I swear it by the god of the Mhyrnians!" He looked upward again, jeering—his voice rising to near hysteria. "Do You hear me? Strike me dead if I lie!"

Goren's eyes moved up toward the hovering Helotoid.

"Oh, ho, ho. I see. Well, yes. You are not invincible from him, either—but then he is my instrument—my agent of destruction. Now, look you, my bulbous friend. Take a care! Do not even try to subvert him. The Helotoid serves my Master and, therefore, me with absolute, unwavering loyalty. He will serve you as well so long as you serve the will of Echion. Once you stray from that he will utterly destroy you. Do you follow me?"

Goren closed his eyes. "I do."

"Well, well that is all good. At last it seems we understand each other. I suppose I can safely animate more than just your eyes and voice now."

Korday took a tubule of green light in each hand and began gliding their tips across Goren's body—arms, legs, chest. Goren felt sudden sensation boil up beneath their bright, verdant touch—not pain, but a tingling, as if his whole body had been cut off from its circulation of blood and then restored. Goren tried his arm. It lifted before him, supporting his thick hand before his eyes. He could see small glowing spots within it—under the skin—not unlike the

glowing, pulsating blisterings of the Hurd. Goren examined his arm. There were more such oddities there, along with occasional bumps of metal swelling up through his skin like boils. As he watched, a spark of blue energy flashed between two such adjacent bumps.

"Power, my rotund dupe. The machines of power. Is there any pain? There shouldn't be."

Goren shook his head. "Just a tingling."

"That will go."

Goren sat up. For the first time in years that act did not make him even the slightest bit dizzy. Korday, as if reading his thoughts, spoke.

"You have only a thin layer of polarized fat, now—just for thermal protection. The rest of you rots with double tempered muscular harmonoids—little mechanolife cells perfectly engineered to support heavy, internal machinery. And your skin—your skin is transparent to all the energy fields you can generate from inside you but opaque to virtually everything disruptive from without." Korday rubbed his hands together. "I have made you into a Stormer—a destroyer such as has not been seen in this galaxy for many millennia of millennia!" He laughed with glee. "Power, I say! Invincibility, I say! Perfect for our none-too-little task. And what is most perfect of all is that your excessive, natural corpulence has allowed me to install lots of different devices—lots more than I could have put into a thin man.

"A Stormer! A Stormer! I remembered how! Oh great God of Darkness, I thank Thee! Echion—God of Endless Destruction! You must be seeing me now! Do you not see my plan? I have remembered the Dark Secrets! You have recalled them to my mind, oh greatest of all Gods! This is better than I ever dreamed!"

But Goren only half heard all this. His attention held unshakably upon the dazzling, green brilliance that shone within a sphere floating beyond the foot of the medical table he had sat up upon. Many radiating shafts of light emanated from it—solid shafts—more of the tubules Korday had used on him. These wove and swayed slowly in the air like flows of glowing plasma one could touch and even hold. Within the globe itself Goren could see things through squinting eyes—swirling green glories like flames and shining clouds punctuated with sparkling points of white brilliance.

Behind the sphere—seemingly in answer to the presence of such a wonder, the very walls of the cavern heaved in low, rumbling pulsations—dark living things. They were themselves covered with all kinds of seething outcroppings. Some resembled exotic plants while others seemed to be steady, roiling blisters of protoplasm from which insect-like creatures erupted and scrambled away or took flight into an air already abuzz with all kinds of flying things.

Goren stared in wonder. All things were in motion. Odd creatures and bizarre plants crowded everywhere—living things more diverse than Goren had ever imagined possible, swarming, crawling and hovering in the air. Korday moved among them uncaring. They changed before Goren's eyes in sparkling mutations even as the spidery thing had changed as it crawled over the Puller-entrapped Mhyrnian that hung above his head.

A steady, rich ringing pervaded all of this—a shimmering, living mixture of bell and voice, strings and pipe organ. The green glory hummed softly and delicately—persistently. Softer than this, echoing from far off dark corners behind the dazzling green jewel, Goren could hear strange, soulful cries and the sloshing, wet gurgling of heavy flesh moving ponderously, sluggishly against itself. As his gaze moved across the spectacle, Goren found glowing eyes that peered at him from behind twisting roots of stone. It was more than he could take in.

Korday smiled. "Ah, yes, The Treasure! Go on. Get up. Go look at it. I find myself spending hours looking at it, and I've had possession of the fool thing for a score's score of millennia, I

have! Thousands of millennia. Well, go on! It won't hurt you—not that one!"

Goren walked toward it. Each step flooded higher and higher waves of vitality into him. Each step closer made him feel younger and more vibrant. There were squishings and crunchings beneath each step. Goren looked down to see the ruined bodies of creatures he had just killed by stepping on them. They littered the floor like a tremulous carpet, as far as Goren could see inside this dark cavern. Even as he regarded the curious remains, new life sparkled up from them, phoenix-like.

"Them," Korday laughed at Goren's stepping death. "They are nothing. Go closer and ignore whatever you step on. It is of no consequence." To prove his point, Korday viciously ground his heels into the seething garden of life beneath him. Goren heard soft, high-pitched death cries. Korday only grinned.

"Closer, I say. See anything particular inside?" Korday's voice trembled with excitement.

Goren looked intently. Waves of green and yellow hues stirred among the verdant radiance while rich flashes of blue flowed and sparkled inside. Goren squinted, not because of the brightness, although that was nearly hurtful. He squinted because he thought he could see something specific—a definite shape—an object sculpted of light.

Was it a tree? At the very moment he asked himself that, the image crystallized into that shape—a glowing tree whose trunk shone yellow and whose leaves were vivid green—vivid in the same way that Procyx was blue. The *shadows* of the leaves—all the *dark* places of the tree were not dark at all but shone a deep, ultramarine blue. Sparkling white blossoms burst out everywhere. They were like tiny swirling, galaxies. Goren gasped at an intensity of beauty he had never even imagined possible.

"*The Tree of All Living*, the Mestrate Primoids call it," Korday said, leaning forward to look at it. His head hovered mere centimeters from Goren's. "Another name they use is *The Fountain*. Good enough names. It is the Treasure of Life—the great jewel stolen from the Highest realms of the suns of humanity. You see every world abounding with living things was given its life—its own genetic uniqueness by this treasure! Every variety of life had its roots here." He laughed. "A pun!"

"Where did you—how did you get it?"

"It was in the early days—the Dawn Era—the days of the morning stars; the days of the first empires. While we amassed worlds and fortunes, the Mestrate Primoids fled in their first, laughable ships of light. They hid among nebulae and newly formed planets. It was there that they obtained Treasures of Glory. There are fifteen of them in all; jewels—devices of power they say were given them from the far, deep heavens." Here, Korday paused. A look of uncomprehending ridicule twisted the corners of his mouth. "The Primoids wasted their time and powers on overseeing the ecological building of worlds. The treasures of Glory empowered them to do this. Millions of years they might spend—billions! Imagine! *Imagine!* And they did this upon planet after planet—millions of them across the galaxy—and in other galaxies too, I wager. Can you comprehend the colossal waste in using them on so moronic—so silly a task? Idiots!

"However they secured them, when *we* learned of these jewels, we devised far better uses for them." He laughed. "Anything would make more sense than what they were doing. Power—such power used for this? *This?*

"Well, we created a plan to obtain them for ourselves. On a planet called Tolereth, Echion stole the Treasure of Life from the Primoids. It was our most glorious moment!" Here, Korday smiled ruefully, gazing at the dazzling green orb. "From this, we built the Helotoids, the Ark of Hurd, and the billion fleets.

"After we robbed the Treasure of Life, the Primoids disappeared for centuries. This delayed our plans for obtaining the rest of the Treasures but we worked on without them. Our empire spread without opposition. We even gained many of the planets we had seen Primoids themselves seed with life. You see the waste now? We conquered in days what took the fool Primoids eons to create—and ruled them!

"Then, as the Third Empire of Echion reached its most glorious height, one of our invincible shock troops disappeared in the midst of what should have been a routine invasion campaign. Only one of our razor ships escaped and but one of ten thousand Helotoids of that fleet remained alive to tell us what had happened."

Korday's face darkened. His eyes sparkled with what Goren perceived as anger so deep that it took all of Korday's strength to contain it. "The Mestrates had returned. The Helotoid told us of new ships—terrible ships. He called them Echion's Bane! Vanguards, they are called. *These* now held and dispensed the power of the Treasures of Glory. Nothing Echion might raise could defeat them—or even touch them. Ultimately, that was what led my Master to construct the Billion Fleets.

"*These* have power to disable the Vanguards—enslave them! Each ship of the Billion Fleets is endowed with a full measure of the Black Arts—each one! Victory is assured us—provided . . ." Korday smiled now. " . . . *Provided* the Warriors of Light can be killed before reaching the Master Vanguard named Procyon or, even better, by destroying their ancestors! That, you see, is *my* plan! But then, this I have already said. When the Warriors of Light are removed, we shall have power to capture and possess *all* the Treasures of Glory. When *that* day comes, all the Arts of Light shall be done away. *Nothing* will be able to stand against us! Nothing! We shall rule the very stars of God! We shall stand above the throne of the Most High and cast his powerful ones down into oblivion! None shall disturb us in the fulfilling of our desires and our rule in blood and horror shall stand forever!"

Korday's lips were covered with the slightest traces of foamy saliva. He turned to look at Goren with steely eyes. "You think me mad? Oh, fool if you do. Whatever else may happen I have the power to reduce you to bloody rubble, and this at my slightest whim! Do not doubt it! Unlike you, I am known by the Hurd. It was I that saved your life from him—that turned his Helotoid from you, and this that you might serve me!" He smiled, drying his lips.

"Now, the time for us to dupe the Mhyrnians and seize the planet has arrived. We must hurry. Prudence, my obese comrade! Prudence and the wisdom of millennia live within me. I, in that infinite wisdom dictate that we must act now. It seems there are rumors that the Holy Man and Infidel of the Primoids are somewhere on Mhyrn. True or no, we must act as if they were. We must reach the Outer City of Zorl before *they* do. But first, there is one matter of business I must complete. Come. It will give you a much needed opportunity to test your powers."

* * *

The room seemed to be made of glass. The walls were panes of irregular shapes and sizes wedged together like some bizarre stained glass fashioned into a large dome. Tied in bundles all around the floor were rolls of thin, gold sheeting ornate with etchings engraved on them. Goren regarded them curiously. He looked all around. Behind each glass he saw covered in dark, slivery cloths what looked to be the forms of bound Mhyrnian bodies. There must have been hundreds of them—maybe thousands of men, women and children wrapped tightly in silver, like mummies. Here and there, Goren could see tiny cracks in the mummy-like wrappings where the reflection

of some kind of inner light shone. Though the light was not bright there was a searing quality to it, and Goren felt immediately uneasy.

"What is this? Who are they?" he asked Korday.

The Cluster Lieutenant of the Dragon of Night answered with grotesque haltings, though his hard face remained steady.

"Th . . . th . . .ese are th . . . th . . .the only p . p . p . people who might have s . s . s . stopped us. The f. f . f . family of the m . m . m . Most hhhhhhh . . . High Noblmen t . t . t . t . to the Great God!" Korday's face contorted into a horrible mask as he said the last words. He took a deep breath squinting. "All of them are here, now—here with their records; their vile scriptures and s . s . s . secrets. Those rolls of gold there . . . see them? Dep . . . depraved, ugly, putrid secrets that destroy. Priests! Witches! Vermin seed! Well, none have escaped m . m . m . m . m . me. This I know for certain. None! A . a . a . and now the g . .g . g . g . glorious time has come for their d . d . d . deaths."

A sudden urge to run from here swelled up like nausea. Goren's eyes kept drifting from place to place among the wrapped bodies where the searing light spilled out from within. What *was* that behind the wrappings? Why was he so drawn to it, and then, when his eyes stopped and gazed, his whole being suddenly flooded with a deeply unsettled gnawing?

"What is that light inside them?"

Korday suddenly whirled on him. His voice whined out of him in tight-throated but steady words. "There is no light! There is nothing but clothes that pretend to shine. It is a trick of the light—nothing more! Do not look at it—do not! It is a trick of the Primoids! Do not look even at the shadows of the light. The Primoids would bewitch you and destroy you with it if they could."

But Goren could not pull his eyes away.

"*The Eye that reveals the Self*, they call it! *The Armor of Righteousness!* Liars! Hypocrites! It deceives all that behold it. It shows terrible things that cannot be endured! It d . d . d . destroys!

"Destruction? Is that Righteousness!? It is ever right to destroy? Ha! *Righteousness!"* his voice grated with fervor. "Do the righteous kill—ever? They talk so nobly of building and creating and preserving! Hypocrites!" he screeched hoarsely at the mummies.

"Well, n . n . n . now shall you die—all of you! Now shall you be destroyed, and there shall be no seed left!"

He turned to Goren, who still stared at the tiny cracks of brilliance. Korday slapped him hard across the face, sending the huge *Infidel* tumbling to the floor. Korday followed him, towering over him. "Do you hear nothing?! Fool! Overstuffed packet of putrefying entrails! Look at me! Better. Now, when I have left, you are to c . c . c . close your eyes and destroy all these hypocrites by the power of ou . . . ou . ou . *our* g . g . g golden death. And take a care! Do not open your eyes under any circumstances—no matter what you hear or smell or taste or feel. D . d . d . do not! It would mean death, I tell you! Nothing must distract you. Fire the room for an hour. You can stand it. Fire it until you feel the cavern itself m . m . m . m . mmmmelted into molten lava about your feet. Fire it until there is nothing here but molten slag. Then—th . th . th . then you may open your eyes. There must be nothing left of the cursed clothes or of the bodies—no bones—no amino acids no p . p . p . proteins—nothing, do you hear me? Once all these mummies are gone, we will be safe, invincible! For none know the secrets of making the a . a . a . Armor of Righteousness but th . . . th . . . these—and I have them all! I go now. Do not fail in this. It means death if you do. Be . . . be . . . believe me! I do not lie!"

Goren watched Korday leave. The majestic *Mhyrnian* cringed and shivered beneath the

glass tombs that clustered above him. He twisted in a pained grotesque walk, shoulders hunched and eyes averted to the floor as he hurried out the entranceway and down the long chiseled tunnel that lay beyond. He heard the sound of Korday's deep, awful retching and coughing.

Goren closed his eyes and stood. The room was silent. He could not even hear the sound of his own heart or of his breathing, but then Korday had told him he no longer needed such things as gross organs like a heart and lungs. Goren, the Infidel, clamped his eyes shut and, raising his hands, let fly the searing flames Korday had shown him how to use only minutes ago. He fired the room into a furnace.

The roar of heat was like an awful storm—a blast furnace to melt all blast furnaces. He spewed flames that rivaled a sun's atmosphere . . . and then he heard something more. Rustling sounds? He opened his eyes and looked up. An infant-sized mummy was stirring—struggling. Moments later others around it began to move. Their silvered wrappings began to shift and buckle.

Brilliant light poured into the room. Goren shut his eyes tightly again. He went on and on, the fires spewing from his fingertips. For a time, nothing more happened. He heard the metal rolls, ancient scriptures and secrets shift then clang almost musically against one another on the floor. They crumpled beneath the ever rising heat. Goren could see beyond his eyelids an incredible brilliance and now a deep, wrenching sound of pure power—a singing, throbbing, piercing wealth of magnificent golden sound. It was searingly beautiful—achingly beautiful, recalling in a flash those very few, ephemeral moments of happiness he had stumbled through in an otherwise abusive, miserable childhood. Something gnawed at his insides. Home? *Home?*

There was a shattering explosion. Goren felt shards of glass strike him harmlessly. There were screamings—men, women and children screaming in agony. He had to stop this. This was wrong—deeply wrong. This was not merely robbing empty, dying worlds or ruining defensive war forces. This was genocide. No, he had to stop.

But was he not *Goren the Terrible?*

Nothing so insignificant as the purging of his weak-minded enemies would deter him. He would silence the annoying, incessant whining of their crawly, squirming, cowering spawn. He would burn on, unaffected by the slathering, moaning pleas of mothers for mercy. Nothing would stop *him!* Not now! He continued. Holocaust—unrelenting, resolute.

The smell of burning flesh stung his nostrils but he yet burned and burned.

Fire.

Death.

Minutes passed and soon the cries ceased. The shimmering, liquid sound fell away, leaving only the fierce roar of super-hot fires that stormed on and on.

A chime went off inside Goren's head. An hour? Did he have a clock built into his head as well? He ventured a look.

The room dripped glowing rock. His feet had sunk down into the lava up to his knees. Everywhere, the golden flames roared and churned. He himself was ablaze, but with arcs of blue lightning that roamed across the body nodules of the Black Arts in a feverish gale of energy. He wished he might take a deep breath but could not, and clenching his huge, beefy hands into fists, he stopped the fires.

The molten rock churned and boiled around his legs as he made his way to the entrance. He looked at his feet as he climbed out of the mire. They glowed a dull red, and wherever his foot touched, cooler rock splashed in tiny droplets

Korday huddled in the corner of the cavern, behind the Treasure of Life. Between Goren

and the orb lay the smoldering, charred remains of the ever-spawning life that had surrounded it earlier—destroyed caves away by the fires of Goren's hands. Behind the orb, the life had survived and yet flourished, crawling unnoticed by the Cluster Lieutenant to Echion.

"Are they gone?" Korday's voice was tentative.

"As you ordered," Goren replied. "Nothing remains but molten rock."

"I know. I felt the heat and came back here for safety." Korday stood now, tossing the animals that huddled near him aside. The Helotoid was nowhere to be seen. "Now, we have only one task yet to complete, here. Follow me."

Korday led him into a branching cave. This one spiraled down until it opened into a dimly lit chamber that held a single pedestal hewn from the rock floor. Blue light poured down upon it. On the pedestal rested an orb of pluridium. Next to it was the plate Dualor had held so tightly to him in death—the plate Goren had used to save his life on the Ark of Hurd. The figures of the large, horned man and the dragon-headed man glowed with brown light, smoking softly. The latter figure brightened as Korday stepped forward to lift the two objects.

"The legends," he said to Goren. "They say we must command sacred artifacts—a sphere and plate of pure pluridium, by description. Here they are," he smiled, looking down at them. "Not the real ones, unfortunately. Those disappeared just before the advent of Procyx. All of my searches have failed to reveal *their* location." Korday shrugged, uncaring. "They have probably been sold by the Federationists and melted down for their pluridium. Does that not seem likely?"

He did not wait for Goren to answer, but started back up the spiraling tunnel again. "Still," Korday spoke with renewed confidence. "We must fulfill the prophecies." All traces of his halting, slurred speech were gone, now. "This phony plate serves our purpose especially well—excellently, in fact. You see, it acts like magic. Great for show! And on top of that it pertains to Procyx! Oh, my friend, it was fated to fall into my hands. Look, I'll show you." Korday held the plate for Goren to see. "Here and here. Do you see that these figures glow? Do you know why? I believe they glow because *we* are near them. *We are they!* See? What the Primoids call the False Ones. You are the fat one, complete with horns. Horns are a symbol of power. Did you know that?" He laughed. "Imagine the prophesiers knowing you would be fat! Hmm. Well, we shall use the old prophecies to our advantage in passing these objects off as the true artifacts. Here is how. We shall tell the Mhyrnians that the figures glow because the False Ones are indeed here, now—and that all Mhyrn must be on the watch to capture them when they come. Convincing enough?"

They returned to the cave of the Treasure of Life. The Helotoid was there, standing in stone-like attention, waiting. The wall of the cavern opposite them burned, now, with Procyx-blue energies. "We shall not have failure in our glorious mission," Korday said, walking over to the shining, sphere of green power. "Now that all the Most High Noblemen to the Great God are dead and with them the secrets of making the Armor of Righteousness."

Korday stood mesmerized by the green beauties of the Treasure. He took it in his hands and, turning, began walking toward the coherent, burning wall. "But Prudence—prudence." He took a deep breath and spoke strange words.

"Vish tohn Kahl Jahl Ilkekeeun. Poshk! Poshk fvown Ramm!"

The dark flames began swirling in a vortex. A low throb poured from the flames, climbing and churning until it became a screeching gale, and then the heavy fires imploded in a dazzling flash. A doorway into space opened before Goren and Korday. The stars beyond glimmered in reds and browns—dark. A fowl-smelling, cold wind blew into the cavern from the dark opening that stood at the center of the swirling maelstrom of dismal flames. Frost immediately covered Korday's face and cloak. His scintillating robes crackled from bursting ice shards as he walked

forward, uncaring.

"A portal," he spoke, not turning to face Goren. "The invincible tool of Echion's power; the true father of the Eye of the Procyx before its time—before the days when the Primoids shall use It; the father of Echion's escape in *our* days of power!"

With determined care, he stepped through the warp doorway and released the verdant Treasure of Glory into the cold heavens beyond. There, it floated of itself in shimmering, green resonances—its glory potent above that of the stars that hung there in such oppressive, dulling decline. The Cluster Lieutenant of Echion-turned-Mhyrnian backed away into the cavern once more and then, with a sweep of his hands, closed the portal into nothingness. Goren could see a rich smile on Korday's face. "There. They shall never think to look for it there—not they," he said.

"Who?"

"The Primoids, of course. Never there. *Never* there." He turned to face Goren. "Now, use our golden death again. Empty the cave of all this riffraff—this useless, chance-spawned life. The Helotoid and I will wait outside."

Goren watched them climb the winding slopes of the cave toward the pale light from the opening to the outside, the Helotoid leaving last. His fierce head turned completely around, facing backward as it walked upward behind Korday. It watched Goren with caution; the heavy rifle aimed directly at him until they were lost from view.

Goren turned, feeling the roaring power again surge through his body and ejaculating through his hands. Moments later, the cave raged in a new firestorm of golden, even white-hot energy. Goren heard the horrible screams of the haphazard life spawned of the Treasure, crying out in unknowing, uncomprehending pain ending only moments later in complete death. Goren strolled casually through the storm to make certain his work was done.

"Stormer," he thought, understanding the name, now. "I am the Stormer! This energy I have—it is pure power!" Goren thrilled to it. It was unlike anything he had ever imagined. "I am God," he whispered among the hissing roars, filling the room with blast after blast of fresh super-fire. "God, I tell you!" Now he looked up toward the entrance to the cave. Many men had weighed and guessed at Goren's cunning, ready to overthrow him. He could remember each one of them dying before him. And now this—this golden death! He would work with Korday—for the time being. But when the moment was right . . .

"Goren!" Korday called down to him as the flames fell away into black, smoked lumps wherever a corpse lay smoldering. "Come up here now. I told you we cannot waste time! Come!"

Goren climbed the passageway into the morning light of Mhyrn. Gold tipped clouds stood against the jade green sky and Korday stood looking across the jungle toward a mountain range off to the south. The Helotoid was nowhere to be seen.

"The Helotoid," Goren asked, stepping up beside the false Mhyrnian Nobleman.

"You need not concern yourself about him. He waits. Should we need him or even perish, he and others I have prepared shall be our power beyond the grave—our final vengeance. They will come at my beckon or upon my death. I am certain we truly need fear nothing now, but prudence demands we do everything we can think of to assure the ultimate success of the plan—with or without us. Is that not so?"

"Er, yes—yes. If you say so."

"Prudence has preserved me from the Dawn Era, child! Now. Here is a robe. Put it on. Your hands and face are the only parts of you that should ever be seen by anyone, except by me or the Helotoid. Do you understand? Otherwise, your machines of the Black Arts might be revealed.

"Come!" Korday slapped Goren on the shoulder and shoved him into a walk down the

mountain with jarring strength. “Let us found an empire!”

III

“It was in the days of the Third Empire that the Vanguards came,” Reeber said to Oreb and Kishkor. “They stopped a hundred million ships and ten times as many demon warriors from conquering the galaxy. These evil ones fled before the Vanguards—the twelve warriors against which *nothing* evil could stand. It shall be all twelve Vanguards that shall fight against Procyx and send it away into the far heavens.”

“More than the twelve,” Oreb said excitedly. “The twelve shall fight under the hand of Zorl—the Master.”

Reeber stopped, looking at the boy. “Zorl? Yes, your God.”

Kishkor shook his head. “The Zorl we speak of is but the servant of Him whose name is too holy to speak. Zorl is as the Warriors.”

Reeber stared at them.

“You do not understand?” Kishkor asked quietly. “Zorl is the name of a ship like the other twelve. Zorl is the name of one of the three *great* Vanguards, as you call the Master ships. It rules over the Procyx. It shall lead the others. Together, all shall send the Procyx of Grief into darkness. The ways of Zorl must be followed if this Procyx is to be destroyed. This is a great mystery of my people, but since you know many of the secrets and wear the robe of my father, you may be told all these things.”

Reeber sat back, astonished. He had intended to teach these boys all about the Vanguards, but it seemed they were teaching him. Why not? It fit the pattern of things of late.

“Thank you,” Reeber said. “Thank you for teaching that which is most sacred to one as unworthy as I.” Oreb got up off his chair and came over to Reeber, hugging him. He held the child tightly. “You are good boys—such good boys. Thank you so much.”

For a time they kept each other in silence. Suddenly, the wall opened like a pool and Morse came in.

“Clement—boys. You should come see this.”

They got up, Oreb running on ahead of Morse. The control bubble opened before them. Melana and Celeste were already here. Reeber went immediately to Melana, but his eyes were drawn upward by the view. All about the Bellatrix, within the thinning golden energies that had engulfed them since their escape from the Old World, were the massive black hole arrays of the Eye of Polyphemus. Beyond them, the interior of Polyphemus could no longer be seen. Instead the plane of the galaxy spread before them like a dense ribbon of countless stars. They were rushing through it. The stars streamed past them not unlike the spectacle of White Drive. But here, the stars glittered and sparkled—sometimes flashing, other times flickering between bright colors. It looked unreal.

“We’re coming out,” Morse said. “I wondered if we might not be here.”

“Here?” Celeste asked.

“Perhaps the word *here* is not completely accurate. We are not quite yet in our own space. We are traveling through a parallel dimension of partial existence. I have heard of it before. It is called the Phantom mode.”

“But why are the black holes traveling with us?” Melana asked.

Morse shook his head. “I don’t know, although the answer is probably simple.” He looked at Celeste. “Have you found anything about this in your investigations?”

“No,” Celeste shook her head. “Although I do recall seeing intense nebulae surrounding the destruction of Procyx in the *vision* the Coss sphere presented us.”

“Yes,” Reeber said. “That’s right. Do you suppose those storms were the Eye of Polyphemus?”

“I would say that is likely. But I still don’t know why they would be needed.” Morse finished.

“And what about the artifacts themselves?” Morse queried. “The Coss sphere I can understand. It seems to be taking us to Mhyrn, along with the Eye of Polyphemus. What about the plate? What does *it* do?”

They all pondered that for a time.

“Wait!” Reeber interjected after a moment. “Didn’t the plate speak to the Cygnus while it was still encased in volcanic rock?”

“What? Speak? What do you . . .” Morse’s voice trailed off and suddenly he remembered. “Yes! I remember—when you first demonstrated it to me. The Cygnus reacted with a full, seven-dimensional display and we wondered what was going on. We later asked the Vanguard what had happened and all it would say was that it understood the message, but that it wasn’t intended for *her*. After that, things got so busy I never had a chance to follow up.

“Okay. So the Cygnus understood whatever it was the Coss plate says when it goes through its routine. Where does that get us?”

Reeber thought for a moment. “If the Cygnus said the message wasn’t for her, could it have been intended for another Vanguard? Does the Coss plate speak to a particular Vanguard? It’s a Mhyrnian artifact. Was it intended to speak to a . . . *Mhyrnian* Vanguard?”

“Yes. To Zorl,” Oreb said.

“The golden Vanguard?” Melana said quietly.

“The holy artifacts are tools to be used by the Holy Man and the Infidel to destroy Procyx,” Kishkor added. “They must have them in order to destroy the EndStar of Grief.”

“So that’s the other reason we’re going to Mhyrn? To deliver these to the Holy Man and . . .” suddenly, Reeber’s recollection clicked. He remembered where he had heard the term *Infidel* used as a title. It was in Coss’ notes on the EndStar. “ . . . To the Holy Man and the Infidel who will use them as tools in the Vanguard Zorl to destroy Procyx? Perhaps? Let’s assume so, for the moment—we must get these artifacts to them. But where are they—this Holy Man and Infidel?”

“There are also False Ones on Mhyrn,” Kishkor said. “They must never have the sacred tools. That’s what father taught us so often that we tired of hearing it.”

“So in finding these men it’s not only *where* we have to worry about, but *who*?”

Kishkor nodded.

“How can we be sure?” Melana asked.

“There is only one sure way,” Kishkor said. Oreb walked over to Reeber and pointed at his large stomach. “The sacred robe father gave you—The Eye That Reveals the Self. No evil thing can resist it once it sees it. The more wicked the man is, the more terrible the sight he sees. A man can even die from it, if he is bad enough. The dark, Evil Ones from the Dawn Era fear it most.”

“But how can we find them—the true Holy Man and Infidel, I mean?” Reeber said.

Kishkor smiled at Oreb. “Should we show them?” Oreb nodded

“Come and follow us,” the older boy said. He took Reeber by the hand headed for the

nearest wall of the control bubble.

I V

An intense, green aura surrounded Palmer. He took in a deep breath and an instant later the brilliance subsided. Both he and Methuselah were surrounded by what seemed a massive, tubular, roaring waterfall laid impossibly on its side. The fresh smell of pure, clean water blew gently about them. They stood on a pluridium pathway that stretched away into a faintly glowing mist of rainbow hues some hundred meters ahead. Methuselah lifted his hand, gesturing for Palmer to follow him

They walked along the pathway in silence. Palmer's gaze explored the rushing waters. It seemed as if he could see flashes of spectral flame and sparkling webbings of coherent color dancing and fleeting behind them. They seemed like living light, swimming and drifting among the turbulences. If they did live, they appeared unaware of the tremendous energies of the waters that perpetually stirred them. Palmer looked forward as the shining rainbow mist engulfed him. From the thunder of the waters there rose a shimmering, ringing music. It was of the same order as that aural brilliance that had engulfed him when he had followed Gaultor through the burning waters to Serenity.

Was that only yesterday?

A powerful emotion swelled up from deep within him. It was a feeling long smothered beneath a life of grief and despair born of a certainty that all that lay ahead for humanity was annihilation. The sensation, long smothered, flowered with such strength that he caught his breath. Was it hope, even joy? All the tensions, sorrows, the soreness and pains of a traumatic life drained out of him at this place. He felt as light and energetic as if he were a happy three-year-old again. He was a child facing the unsullied wonders of a new life whose marvels lay invitingly, inexorably ahead.

He paused here for a moment and closed his eyes, basking in the scintillations. After a while Methuselah, smiling, gently took him by the elbow and walked with him beyond the edge of the waters.

A great, transparent, domed chamber opened before them. It was not unlike the control bubble of the ferryship, but vast. A central, looming crystalline tower stood in silhouette against the pink and gold clouds of Serenity's sunset. The tower of *glass* was reminiscent of the molecular structure of the DNA molecule—a spiraling, double helix. Men and women sat at control consoles mounted at various positions about the twisting spirals. They wore uniforms not unlike Palmer's. But there was a significant difference. Each of these uniforms glowed as if white hot. The people turned to see Methuselah and Palmer enter. As if in one accord, they all rose silently to their feet. Methuselah, smiling, raised his hand and just as silently, the crew returned to their seats

"This is the bridge of the Vanguard," Methuselah said walking toward the great tower of crystal. "These are as my family," he said of the crewmembers. He would pause beside each one he passed, sometimes bending over to chat, other times just giving a friendly pat on the shoulder. Then he smiled, as if just hearing his own words for the first time through someone else's ears.

"In all ways we are equals. They are my strong ones—the valiant ones from a hundred ages." He arrived at the bottom of the two hundred-story double helix tower and reaching forward, touched a glimmering blossom of fiery crystals. It flashed verdant beneath his touch and

a moment later Palmer found himself standing beside Methuselah at the very pinnacle of the structure.

"The helm," the old man said. A seated platform, rose from the apex of spine of the double helix. It bristled with crystalline shards that seemed to be made of swirling water suspended within an invisible barrier. Light of varying colors shone up from beneath them. The chair was empty.

"As I said, your part in the destruction of Procyx is to pilot a Vanguard. You must learn to do that. Climb up into the seat, please."

Palmer obeyed, however hesitantly. All of this was so new. He was afraid he might disturb something important of the controls. Still, he swung into the seat. It immediately molded to every contour with such perfection that Palmer felt as if he were resting on air itself.

Directly before him floated two hand-sized orbs of pluridium. As Palmer settled into the seat, the orbs shifted their position, apparently following him. He studied them for a moment then lifted his hands, and the orbs slid in beneath his palms. The moment he touched them, his uniform began to glow in a low, golden light. He turned to look at Methuselah, who stood just behind his right shoulder. The old man's uniform glowed as well, but its light rippled with turbulent, spectral colors.

"How do I. . ." Palmer began, then stopped. Methuselah gazed at him. His eyes penetrated Palmer with such an intensity that he swallowed nervously.

"It is for this that you are a seer," Methuselah said. "Look."

Palmer saw the pluridium orbs glowing white beneath his hands. He felt a growing thrill within him. Taking a deep breath, he opened his powers of Seership.

In that moment, Martin Palmer became the Vanguard Gabriel and the Vanguard Gabriel became Martin Palmer. They could sense every person on board. They saw, in a single moment, each of their lives; enjoyed every hope and sensed the depth of each fear or sorrow. They understood the majesty of every personality on board in its yet to be realized, glorified perfection and beauty. When they turned to study Methuselah, they saw only a pure brilliance and knew it for a blazing, unstoppable outpouring of a love and power beyond inextinguishable.

"Look to the sky," Methuselah said kindly. Palmer obeyed. Stars were beginning to shine in the sunset. Without effort, Palmer saw the worlds of each star as it appeared—and more. He comprehended every continent; every river, strata and rock. These he saw all at once. He could not guess how this could be.

"Wh . . . what am I . . ." the words clung to his throat

"First, lift us above the atmosphere of Serenity," Methuselah said.

"How?"

"Envision it in your mind and the Gabriel shall respond in actuality."

Palmer obeyed. A sudden burst of power surged throughout him. He saw the spectacular blue of Serenity drop beneath him as if it were falling away. His eyes were not even looking down or behind him. Palmer suddenly realized that he was seeing in all directions at once. He staggered beneath the enormity of the experience. This was Freedom! Here was Power. He had never supposed that such feelings were possible to the human experience. His eyes misted under the weight of it. His chest burned with excitement and joy. How could he ever describe this *joy of the Vanguard* to anyone?

"Here will be fine," Methuselah said. Palmer took a deep breath and slowed the Gabriel. "Now, my brother, look out across the universe."

Palmer looked up. Galaxies arrayed themselves like glistening shells across the deep

heavens. He could see every star, every nebula. Each nova blazed in its massive brilliance. All the pulsars and black holes churned their rare gravities. Palmer fathomed deeper into the realms of the astralaxies with their scintillating radiances oscillating among every state of matter and energy. He perceived them in ways that humanity could not imagine. He saw the kingdoms of the spiritars—massive, star-like objects that were brilliant and yet lacked all evidence of any measurable substance. He saw the tiny probes sent by humanity into the remotest heavens. Beyond them he beheld the furling turbulences of the time curtains and beyond into realms where what seemed to be stars glimmered in deep reds and cold browns.

"Search for a galaxy where a massive binary of black holes orbits at the very edge," Methuselah said. Palmer drew himself back and scanned the galaxy clusters. He could see hundreds of millions of multiple black hole systems. His gaze moved across and beneath him—searching. Then, directly beneath the Gabriel, Palmer found one galaxy that fit Methuselah's description.

"There," he said. "I see it."

"That's the one. Take us there."

Palmer fixed his eyes on the black hole pair. The Gabriel pitched majestically and began to rumble beneath him. The stars of Serenity vanished in a skewing blur. Moments later, intervening galaxies began drifting apart before the onrush of the Gabriel—slowly at first then more rapidly. As the ship accelerated, the galaxies loomed ever closer. They flashed past in shuddering, sparkling dazzles. Their globular clusters sprinkled by—glowing, windblown dandelion heads.

Still, the Vanguard accelerated beneath Palmer's touch. He barely heard the murmurings of astonishment from the crew below him. Never, apparently, had a Vanguard traveled as fast as the Gabriel did, now under Palmer's helm. He understood their wonder, but it seemed distant and unimportant. The ship's course held his attention in trance-like concentration.

More galaxies flashed past and still more. The acceleration continued to climb. At last the wonder arose within him. Unlike the crew's, it was not intellectual. It was a more like childlike amazement—delight; joy; excitement, and as his intellect joined the experience he recognized all that he felt. It was like being at home. His eyes blurred at the rush of this realization This was what he had searched his whole life to find—this unity he had established with the Gabriel. But the unity did not cease with the Vanguard. He was also one with Methuselah and one with the crew—great and powerful men and women from worlds across space. Each of them had already shared the unity in the way he felt now. He had joined them.

Palmer's uniform blazed in searing golds. His eyes shone white-hot. His hands radiated sparks and fires of rainbow scintillations. The Gabriel took and amplified the glories that were Martin Palmer so that it could cross the dark sea impossibly fast. Palmer did not know how he knew that this was so. He did not care. All the universe lay before him—before them all. There seemed no star, no particle of sand on any beach of any world Palmer might not see or touch.

And then, roaring up from the back of his mind came Procyx. He burned with a raging hunger to see it ruined! Here, beneath his hands was the power to do it. Of this he no longer had any doubt. He had knowledge. The Vanguard climbed to higher levels of power. All around the massive vessel, lightning arcings and webbings of rainbow hues leapt and swirled. Here were forces and glories of unfathomable strength from beyond the beginning of the universe. Again, Palmer did not wonder how he knew such things anymore. He just knew that they were.

Dark buffetings shook the Gabriel. Distant galaxies disappeared for a time as the Vanguard plunged through intergalactic nebulae. They were hidden, dark and cold; a thousand

times larger than any galaxy should be. The shuddering passage revealed fleeting scenes of glory. New galaxies stirred within the colossal clouds—stars and worlds struggling to life in their inky depths. The Gabriel burst free into clear space again.

Palmer began decelerating. The target galaxy loomed ahead. Globular clusters appeared and slipped past the Vanguard as it began a long turn around the outside of the spiral star swarm, homing on the black hole binary Methuselah had directed him to find. It lay on the far side of the Gabriel's approach.

The black holes came into unaided view. They seemed excessively massive to command such a galactic position. Mysteriously, there was no evidence that they were pulling *any* stars from their courses. Surely black holes of such magnitude should be ruining the continuum around them. Yet such did not seem to be the case. It made Palmer wonder.

"The anchor black holes," Methuselah said. "The harbor stars of power. Here is pivoted the future of the universe beyond the end of the Procyx of Grief. Look, Martin. Do you see their power?"

Palmer nodded in wondering silence.

"Now, good brother," Methuselah said. "Look beyond them—inward toward the galaxy. Do not look far. You should find a world that is new and vibrant with life. It rests within the edges of a birthing nebula."

Palmer searched and saw such a world. It was light years distant.

"That is the pivotal world. You and others shall come here to establish a nation of worlds. It shall be when all these days of grief are faded. It is already a place of holiness. There, your children shall rise to the stars. All of this is in preparation for that future, pivotal event at the Harbor black holes. Do you understand?"

Palmer thought for a moment. "I understand your words."

"You are the father of worlds," Methuselah said. "From you shall arise the Warriors of Light. It shall be upon this planet that they shall begin their quest. That is why you must return here. That is why you *must* survive the days ahead, at all costs. The horrors of those future times will be as terrible, in their way, as the days of the Procyx of Grief. The Warriors of Light will assure the final victory over the evils of those truly dark days."

Palmer wondered at this for a time.

"Do you understand now?"

"I am beginning to."

"That is enough for now. Very well. Turn yourself toward the Harbor stars."

Palmer swung the Gabriel to face the black hole binary.

"When you command the Vanguard Zorl, you shall be called upon to display strength and power. You must hold your ship in a specific attitude for as long as is required of you. At that difficult time, the forces Procyx shall exert upon you will increase tremendously. They shall grow to be all but unbearable and then unbearable at last. You must not allow the Zorl to waver, even in the face of such agonies. The only way you will be able survive to finish the destruction of Procyx will be to learn to use the powers of the Vanguard to their fullest extent. That is why you are here. The challenge of the Harbor stars can teach you something of those terrors of assault. If you learn well, you will be prepared."

Palmer felt a sudden chill at these words. For a moment he considered quitting. "Gaultor—what'll he do?"

"He shall focus the powers of destruction."

"The Golden Death."

"You understand much already."

"I guess I do. I don't know."

"It will be a difficult time for you both. But no matter what happens, you must concentrate only on *your* part of the mission. Gaultor will carry out his part to its end. For your part, you must neither give up nor turn away. That would be tantamount to abandoning your post. If either of you stop before all is completed, ruin *will* result. Though you might escape, the end of all things will surely become reality. It will only be a matter of time."

Palmer said nothing. Methuselah went on.

"Now, let us begin. Your task here is to travel directly between the two black holes. You must chart then execute an unwavering course. If you relent before completing the passage, we might all be destroyed. As you can surmise, this training is designed to simulate many aspects of your mission at Procyx, as I have described it. It is as it will be there. Once you commit, there is no turning back. This must be so, my brother. Thus it will be in the quest to destroy Procyx."

"I've just barely lifted the ship . . ."

"You are the first, ever, to so do without instruction. You draw upon worlds real, though lost and forgotten to you. If you do not believe this, merely look upon what you have done! You are the first to fly the Father Vanguard across the galaxies in so brief a time. You have brought this vessel to a place billions of light years distant! This, that could not even be discerned at such a distance with even the most powerful of megascopes. Don't you understand, my brother? You are *The One*. For this very task you were born in these days of grief. You have been endowed with powerful gifts and a vital desire to serve others. You are the pilot of choice. You are the commander of the Vanguard Zorl. You were called forward and assigned this task from before the beginning of the universe, though you were not yet born."

Palmer shook his head, confused. "How is *that* possible?"

"One day you will understand. For now, you must accept my word. Have no fear. My word is true. Are you ready to begin?"

Palmer swallowed hard, clenching his eyes tightly for a moment. He nodded once.

"Look forward, then. Open your Seership."

Palmer thought he already had. Methuselah smiled. "Some yes. But you are capable of much more."

Had Methuselah just read his thoughts? Was this enigmatic personage a Mestrate, or merely wise? Or was he just acutely sensitive to human nature? Perhaps it was something more. *Was* there something more?

"You will find that there is much more that you can yet see, if you will look." Methuselah continued. "Now concentrate. Try to see the waves and turbulences. It may be painful to see, but you will be able to endure it."

Palmer looked. The reds of the accretion disks suddenly began to reveal themselves as countless particles of varying sizes, heated to incandescence. They were tugged and tortured in vortices of gravitational waves. As he strained to understand more, Palmer could see beyond matter as if it were merely a cloak. He beheld the gravitational waves themselves.

What was he doing? This was madness! He lifted his hands from the orbs. Methuselah said nothing. Palmer took a deep breath, closing his eyes to the horror. "I can't do it," he shook his head. "It's suicide. I can see no safe . . .

"There *is* no safe course. Nevertheless, you must pass."

"But it's impossible!" And then, quietly, he asked. "How?"

"You are looking at things only as a seer.

"I don't und . . ."

"You forget. You neglect an immense power. You are also the Vanguard Gabriel. Look again as seer and Vanguard *unified*, then find and set your course."

Palmer looked. The turbulences could now be seen into the future. He and the Vanguard as one could see several seconds into the future. "I see ahead," he stammered. "But even so . . ."

"What do you know of pluridium, my brother? Think! What about it is so valuable?"

"What?" Palmer looked at Methuselah, confused.

"Pluridium. What are its properties?"

Palmer shook his head. "I . . ." and then the thought came to him. "It is inter-dimensionally complex. It can alter all forms of energy and force into any other."

"Yes. Consider. The Vanguards are constructed of structured, layered, programmed pluridium."

"I can draw upon the turbulences! I can use gravity itself—redirect it! It can give us the energy we need!

"That is how you can chart your own course. Now, let us go!"

Palmer nodded.

"There is one more thing. The Vanguard has ways of dealing with situations that threaten its existence. It has ways of protecting the crew against its very demise. In moments of grave peril—imminent destruction, the Vanguard may encase all but essential crew in impregnable stasis fields for their protection. These are essentially bubbles where time stops and the universe without can exert no influence upon what is inside. If you see others being caught up in such shells, you must not let it dissuade you from completing our passage between the black holes. You are essential to the completion of this task. *You* will remain to see it through. Others may be protected, but not you. *You* must persist." Then, Methuselah softened. "It may not happen. I merely wanted to alert you to the possibility so that it would not unduly distract you."

Palmer took a deep breath, preparing himself. At last he clutched the piloting orbs once more. He felt his pulse quicken. He studied the binary and its dimensional distortions and horrors. But as he delved into the depths of the Vanguard for help, he found information on past encounters with spatial anomalies. He understood experiences of past commanders that flowed into him like vivid memories. He knew fluently the resources of the Vanguards, their design and construction. He comprehended notions of physics he had never dreamed of. These were deep, unguessable understandings. It was heady. He drank it in—eyes shut but not blind. He could see through the lids. He opened his eyes. Laid out before him on the inner surface of the command dome lay his course, plotted in seven dimensions. It was the combined task of the Gabriel and himself.

He took another deep breath, both focusing his eyes unwavering on the course and watching the hell storms ahead. Beneath him, the Vanguard rumbled into powerful throbbings and the huge vessel began its dance into the harbor stars.

As enormous as the Vanguard was, it responded to the slightest alteration of Palmer's touch instantaneously. There seemed to be no inertia involved, but Palmer guessed that this must be partially the result of the Vanguard's ability to function several seconds into the future. Apparently, it must be anticipating his course changes and making them before he executed them.

At first, the way in was relatively smooth. Occasionally, crew beneath him directed silver bursts of energy from the Vanguard to destroy large masses of heated, glowing debris swinging past ahead in their ever-accelerating fall into the bottomless gravity wells. As he looked into the

future, Palmer saw that the crew also functioned seconds into the future. Palmer wondered if the Vanguard Zorl had a crew as well. He almost decided to frame the question when a voice spoke quietly but urgently inside his head. "Not now," it said. "Later."

The Gabriel weathered sporadic shudders. Palmer's hands began to tire as energies and data flowed back and forth through them while he moved them. There were small winces and tinglings mingled with visible splashes of light between the helm globes and his hands as the Gabriel avoided ever more frequent backwashes and turbulences from the binary moments before the buffetings actually hit. Palmer strained consciously to absorb those forces that were not completely avoided, altering them through the pluridium networks, then using them to add needed power both to ordinance batteries and the incredibly subtle guidance and thrust systems he was only now beginning to understand.

At last the Vanguard was engulfed within the twin accretion disks, mingling and fighting over each particle of debris that fell. Palmer saw every red-hot particle as it swung and danced between the black holes. As his attention moved across them, each was destroyed by an energy beam. It was as if the crew were seeing through his eyes and taking initiative to remove potential obstacles.

A massive, thick darkness swelled up to swallow the Vanguard. Tiny pingings and sounds like distant winds howling their way through caves and pinnacles stirred amid the rumbling hums of the engines. Palmer looked again at the plotted course. The Vanguard was not varying.

An oppressive fear fell suddenly over Palmer's shoulders. He jolted upright, his back arching as if ice water had just been flung on him. The Gabriel lurched. Desperately, Palmer locked his eyes on the course. Still no variance—but barely—just barely.

Then, from the direction of lower black hole, Palmer saw Evanna. It seemed as if they were back on Argol. Alarms sounded from outside. The ground shook beneath them as they looked at each other.

Why didn't you save her? a voice accused from within Palmer's heart. A moment later, amidst explosions and chaos, the huge broken beam swung down from the ceiling to crush her.

"I should have had everyone outside," Palmer winced, staring at the carnage of Evanna's death with fresh horror.

Hold course, the voice spoke within him. Was it the same voice he had just heard? Palmer shook himself and looked up at the plot. The Gabriel had veered but a tiny degree. Moments later, a violent concussion struck. He wrenched the Gabriel back, straining it onto its right course.

Now Palmer saw the crippled shuttle, floating below him on a dark island of rock that drifted on a swirling, molten sea. Twisted, smoldering bodies were strewn about the vessel. Palmer turned his eyes toward the course plot.

How could so many have died?! He should have forced the Argholians to come, shouldn't he? Why hadn't he broken regulations and made them come? If he had, all those dead bodies would be alive now! They would be thanking him now, instead of burning and smoking in this hell. He sucked in a deep breath, ripping and tearing his mind away. Nothing changed. The guilt held true.

Scan the refugees before bringing them on board! It was the voice again—chiding, accusing. But it need do little more than say the words, and Palmer condemned himself. He clenched his teeth. Who was talking to him? The voice spoke again from within him. *If you had just scanned them you would have found the devices of the combine outlaw and prevented the hijacking altogether.*

Palmer shook his head in horror. It was true! All of it! Still, he fought to hold the Gabriel.

"It was trust I was trying to establish!" he hissed. "I was trying to heal the wounds between us . . ."

And you killed a good man in the process. You may as well have pulled the trigger on Jenson yourself! Now he has a widow who will grieve not only a lost son, but a dead husband. It's your fault. You might be safely in Federation space now—heading home to Arrleen . . .

"But Gaultor and I . . . We are The Ones! "

You should never have left the ferryship to go after parts. Your place was in command. If you hadn't been off doing things yourself to make sure they were done right—you would have thought of precautions—cleared the ship . . .

Stay on course! the voice interrupted itself sharply in Palmer's mind. He yanked himself out just as a massive shock wave rocked the Vanguard. Below him he saw crew hurled from their stations. He pulled the Gabriel back.

"Who are you?" Palmer cried, perspiration stinging his eyes.

Don't you know? Who could know all this—could judge you justly but a god? Listen to me and fear me! I am the God of the Mhyrnians.

Palmer shook his head, squinting.

You should have pulled everyone out of the ferryship on Mhyrn. Then none would have died in the attack of the outlaw combine ships. Yes! What were you thinking? Were you so naive as to think that the hijacker would not have landed where he did if he were not to be met? Fool! You are responsible for the deaths of the crew—men and women with families—children. You are worthless.

"I'm worthless . . ."

You must pay for the lives . . .

"We are The Ones!" Palmer whispered, doubting now.

You are not. My chosen already stand on Mhyrn.

"But the Vanguards . . ."

A fraud. It is a sparkling lie! The evil ones, pretending righteousness, are training you to try to stop my work. But they fear only their own deaths. Listen to me! This is truly the End of All things. I am God! I have spoken it in my wrath. Turn aside from this course and I will yet save you!

The Gabriel was well off course now. The vessel shuddered continually. The intense rainbow energies shone in blinding brilliance. Palmer looked up at the course, desperate—confused.

You are too far off course to recover now anyway. Nothing you can do will save you. But it is as I have decreed. I shall destroy all my enemies! You are not worthy to live. Come into My arms. Turn in toward me. I rule from the lower black hole. I govern all things from this low place that the high and arrogant shall be brought down! You are one of the arrogant ones. How do you dare to think you are one of the chosen? I say again, fool! You are but a murderer—a killer of women and children; an incompetent fool with hallucinations that you are more than a wretched infidel come to destroy my work—MY WORK! If you have any spark of goodness in you will come into me and pay for the lives you have taken.

The Gabriel drifted further and further toward the lower black hole. Below him, Palmer could now see spinning, opaque, black spheroids closing over the crew like materializing nautilus shells, rolling forward to cover them.

You see—the demons flee before my power, down into their own puny hells. None stand by

you, now. None! So it always is with the evil. Cowards!

"Martin," a voice spoke from behind him. It was Methuselah.

"Help me," Palmer called back toward the blinding light of the old man. "I don't know what to do!"

"You are a seer! Look upon the true likeness of him who speaks within you. Look at the black hole. Look deeply."

The Gabriel was tossed and hurled about like a leaf in a whirlwind. Palmer shut his eyes and strained through the darkness, pierced the dazzling, furrowing energies of the lower black hole.

A dazzling figure—surely a god—stood above countless stars. He was Mhyrnian and wore the robes of Nobleman design, but they were golden, shining like whirling flames of fire. Horrified with paralyzing guilt, Palmer lifted his hands away from the control spheres.

"You do not see deeply enough," Methuselah said. Palmer gazed with unblinking eyes, mesmerized. "Martin! You are a seer. You do not see what is truly there. Look deeper. Look!"

Slowly, Palmer shook his head no.

There was a sudden, burning stinging at Palmer's temple. His eyes suddenly exploded with pain. Palmer clutched at his eyes. Through his hands he saw Methuselah's blazing hand withdraw from having touched him.

"Look!" Methuselah persisted. "Look until you can bear no more. You must! "

Palmer fought to obey. The god's glory blazed searing gold in a kind of stinging sparkle. Palmer probed deeper and deeper into the vision.

The Vanguard shuddered continually. Bursts of light flashed all around as red-hot debris crashed into the security shields. Each impact seemed to consume more and more power, at last drawing the protection shield into visibility. The rainbow arcings and flashes were gone, now. The massive vessel began whining against the superheated maelstrom of doomed matter that spiraled inexorably toward absolute ruin.

"I can't . . ." Palmer whispered, barely noticing the near crumblings of the Vanguard. "It's impossible! I . . ." Suddenly the glorious god collapsed in on himself, only to explode in turbulent, brown flames. In its place roiled a hideous dragon. It flailed against a piercing, heavy darkness—wet and smoldering—burn encrusted and surrounded by its gruesome, writhing spawn. All were unshakably fettered in a putrid, deep mire. When his eyes met the dragon's it screeched at him, foul, black flames exploding from its grotesque mouth.

A lie! The dragon screamed hoarsely. "What you see is a lie! See . . ." Then, its gaze swung toward Methuselah's brilliance. *You! You! What have you to do here? This one is mine!*

Palmer suddenly recoiled in a mixture of fear and renewed determination. He scrambled at the wildly aimless control bubbles, catching first one, then the other. His fingers closed on them.

The crew of the Gabriel was entirely invisible to Palmer within their stasis bubbles. He, alone, was free. No. Behind him shone Methuselah. Only a light now—a light that one could not bear to look at. Without, the rainbow glories of the Vanguard were losing a desperate battle with the incredible forces and energies of the black hole. The earlier reds of the accretion disk had given way to yellows and whites. Thousands of explosions lay ahead, as asteroids and other debris shattered beneath the intense pressures of gravitational hell. Palmer clutched the guidance orbs—squeezing them so hard that his hands began to tingle. He saw his fingers sinking down into the very fabric of the orbs as if they were made of ice and his hands were red hot.

The Gabriel buckled in a terrible screeching whine, then began to turn. Behind him, Palmer could feel the explosive force of the Vanguard's engines opening wider and wider—more powerfully than he had felt before when he had leapt across the intergalactic void in mere seconds.

Turn back, you fool! I am God. You will bring only death upon more and more if you do not offer yourself up to me to redeem them!

The Gabriel pulled and strained unyielding against the death grip of the black hole. Palmer saw his hands mere fists now, clenched within the glowing control orbs. Hundreds of tiny sparks flowed across his skin—everywhere. "Help me true God of the Mhyrnians," he whispered. "Please, God! Help me!"

The Vanguard shuddered once—twice. Now, just barely, the Gabriel began turning back onto its course.

Your parents are here, the dragon said. *They grieve for what you have become!*

"Liar!" Palmer hissed.

No! NO! I am your God! I! I will have you yet! I will destroy all your sons and daughters! I will rule here in blood and terror unless you offer yourself to me, now!

Palmer all but screamed out in defiance and resolution. The tiny arcings of power that flowed across him grew larger and larger. They began leaping outward—farther and farther. He heard the dragon's voice screaming horrible things within his mind, but paid them only passing understanding. His eyes never left the course. He felt one with the Gabriel more than before—ten times more strongly than before, perhaps a hundred times more. The great vessel shone with such radiance that it far outshone a hundred suns—and finally, Palmer could endure the brightness. He saw Methuselah behind him, not just a blinding light anymore. He saw form and shape—a man of power whose whole frame shone with light. His eyes were like bright flames; his skin was translucent—white hot. His hair was like dazzling, solar prominences, though laid perfectly calmly upon his head. Beneath his feet the ionized air was bright like molten gold.

The Gabriel pulled free of the black hole binary and soared back upward, deep into intergalactic space. The galaxies hurled past faster than before.

There surged within Palmer a magnification of the unmatched joy he had felt earlier and he saw, as if it stood high above the universe, the second realm of greater power. It was the higher heaven of seas and moons he had seen standing above the city of unity. It opened again to his view but now in a fullness he had not found before. He began to sense things about it he had not imagined. An understanding of things began to unfold before him. He caught in fleeting glimpses an unguessable value in all things. A brief perspective of omniscience fluttered across his eyes and his heart.

For a fleeting instant it was as if he could see an unmatched preciousness that could stem away from even the most terrible of seeming tragedies. He saw the framework of a marvelous plan. It began to unfold before him—the joys of life; of birth; love and pain and of death, even from Hypermotility. All were shown clearly, though in a fractional glinting, to serve a magnificent purpose, the depths and breadth of which exceeded imagination. It was purpose of goodness—that which he glimpsed. His eyes filled with tears as hope stirred anew within him, then flared as if into a blue hot radiance. He could not endure more than a few seconds of it before falling away into unconsciousness.

* * *

Palmer stood before the falling waters on Serenity, behind which burned the white fires of the intergalactic passage that went back to Mhyrn. He wore a large, roomy, hooded cloak over his Vanguard's uniform. Methuselah stood with him. Together, they waited.

"Methuselah, I have a question that has confused me. What was the voice I heard between the black holes? Perhaps I should ask who?"

Methuselah did not answer right away. When he did, his eyes were filled with a kind of probing wondering.

"You saw who spoke to you?"

"I did. The Dragon. But other times it told me conflicting things."

"Hmm," Methuselah thought for a moment. "If that is so, do you believe that it was but one being who spoke to you?"

"What do you . . . you mean there were two?"

"One was the Dragon. The other was the Gabriel itself. The Vanguards live. They are pure in their obedience to righteousness and wise beyond much of human experience."

"But they sounded alike. I couldn't tell them apart. And then there was the false vision. I believed it. I did!"

"I stung you," Methuselah said kindly. "Sometimes only pain can help us see clearly."

"He said he was god."

"He believes it himself, but this time the Dragon said this to deceive you."

"Who is it? What could seem like a being of such goodness and yet be a demon? It sounded just like the Gabriel—at first. Tell me. Who is it?"

"Don't you know?"

Palmer thought for a moment.

"Echion?"

Methuselah nodded.

"Then there really was . . . is such a person?"

"There is, and one day he will escape upon humanity again, in all of his wrath. That will be a terrible time. Only the Warriors of Light of those days will have power to destroy his works."

"My descendants?"

Methuselah nodded again. Just then, Gaultor emerged from the trees, accompanied by the woman who had first led him away when they had arrived here. The Mhyrnian smiled broadly when he saw him. Palmer returned his smile. There was something in Gaultor that Palmer could see now—a kind of translucence, as in the very old who have lived good lives and almost shine as they hover near the end of their days. Gaultor broke into a trot, coming forward. He took Palmer in his arms and hugged him with the deep warmth of a brother's love. Palmer held him, slapping him on the back in complete fellowship. They were unified completely and utterly. Palmer basked in it.

This simple realization flooded him with a swelling sense of love. He and Gaultor were not only The Ones, but they were one. And yet it was not only a love for Gaultor he felt or an admiration for all he was. It was an expanding love that spread and extended outward to embrace, with warmth and determination, every man, woman and child he had ever known. And it was not limited to them! All humanity seemed suddenly worth anything he had to do to preserve life and worlds. Palmer was fully alive, now—eager to be going—to finish the work. When he parted from Gaultor, Methuselah held in his hand a delicate chain of pluridium. Hanging from it was a notched arrowhead shaped medallion. It was similar to the head of the shrine they had come to on the road of the gods back on Mhyrn.

"This is the Great Key," Methuselah said, handing it to Gaultor. "This will open the temple of Zorl to you. When it is united with the sacred plate that will come to you in due time, together they will awake the Vanguard Zorl. You have both received instruction as to what you must do then."

Methuselah turned to Palmer as Gaultor put the Great Key around his neck and hid it beneath his robes. "When you pilot the Zorl you will need to hold its position against all disruptions. When Gaultor begins directing the powers of the Zorl against Procyx, you must not waver, not in any degree. Do you understand?"

Palmer nodded, sober. "This time I won't."

Methuselah nodded. "It is well. Now I must give you each one more instruction. The Zorl operates through the powers of the Golden Death. From here on, you must not use those powers for any purpose except for the destruction of the Procyx. If you do, you may fail in your mission, or die in its completion."

He looked solely at Gaultor now. "Gaultor, from Martin Palmer will come the Warriors of Light—the two who shall overthrow the powers of Echion in days ahead. Whatever else happens, Martin must survive."

Now he turned to Palmer. "Do you understand? If you die, we may not be able to raise others strong enough to destroy the works of Echion in the final days of his power. You *must* survive."

Palmer swallowed visibly, but nodded.

"Now, my good brothers, it is time to return. Go with resolve. You stand as bearers of the very power of the Creator. The days of Grief are soon to end. You *are* The Ones."

Gaultor bowed his head in silence, taking a deep breath, and without further hesitation walked into the burning waters to disappear into the place of Hope on Mhyrn.

"Thank you, for this," Palmer said after a moment's hesitation. He began toward the waters and hesitated, turning back. "Will we ever meet again—you and I?"

"When your days are full, we shall meet again," Methuselah said. Palmer nodded once, then turned toward the waters.

He ventured a look at the city of unity for the last time, his throat thick with emotion. He did not want to leave. He took a deep, steadying breath, clearing the moisture from his eyes and yet found his gaze drawn inexplicably to the gardened ground of the nearest edge of the white city hovering above snow-brushed mountains far away. The city's crowning, turbulent, column of fire persisted against the stars. Palmer's gaze discovered two figures who seemed themselves to be looking down upon him. They were sufficiently remote that he could not see their faces. Even so, there was something about them that held his gaze. They seemed to be looking directly at him.

Were they?

An impossible suspicion flooded through him. He could not breathe at considering the possibility, and simultaneously knew with a complete burning certainty that his feelings about them were right. Through the new swelling of moisture that blurred his vision he thought he strained toward these two—these whom he had not seen since a tragic, tumultuous day on a dying world light-years away and decades past. The taller of them lifted a familiar arm in an unmistakable wave—an arm whose loving, protecting hold Palmer yearned to bury himself in again. "Some day . . ." he muttered thickly.

They vanished—the city itself disappeared behind a fiery flourish that fell away into a starry darkness. A wave of deep thunder was all that lingered behind. It rolled and echoed into

the cool distance of Serenity. Palmer wiped his eyes again, turning to Methuselah, but found himself alone. Straightening with resolve, he plunged into the burning waters back toward Mhyrn.

To be continued in the November 2003 issue of Deep Magic...

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